

I Like Birds

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I Like Birds

by [chinashopbull](#)

Summary

Deadpool does a better job understanding Spider-Man's strengths and limitations as an autistic super than pretty much anyone else does. This doesn't stop Peter from getting involved with a cult while investigating a series of suicide bombers. He's just that much of a disaster, autistic or not.

I play fast and loose with canon but try to stay true to (what I perceive to be) the spirit of the characters. Note that neither Peter nor Wade are based on any movie versions.

- Chapter-specific warnings will be given.
- Story/chapter titles are all Eels songs.

Making Friends

Chapter Summary

In which guacamole is important, Peter and Deadpool have a Lifetime Original moment, and the author doesn't know shit about what this story is even doing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's not the rooftops Peter likes; it's the *edge* of the rooftops. The local cliché is that no one looks up and like all clichés it's absolutely true — except for tourists, who are too baffled by the skyline itself to notice a scrap like him crouching or crawling or cartwheeling around near the top. So they don't count.

Up here, Peter sees people but they don't see him. He can read their movements like a lioness reading a herd of gazelles, but on the off chance they even notice him, he's a cipher to them.

The role reversal is addictive, and probably it's childish to get a thrill out of that, but after nine years as Spider-Man the thrill still hasn't worn off, and until it does he's determined to relish it with every part of his tongue. Good to the last drop.

The wind at the top, at the edge, is stronger, and relentless, and unblemished by obstacles. Its white noise is a godsend and Peter's fairly confident that he wouldn't be able to get through a full patrol without at least twenty minutes of this — *just this* — before the real work begins. Not with his sanity intact, anyway. He considers this basic prep work, the unskippable step between crawling out his window and tracking down the first gazelle.

Quiet, outdoor solitude in the middle of Manhattan. Amazing.

Even the birds don't fly this high. They move between the buildings, not above. He likes to watch their backs pass below him in lazy flocks. Some of the flocks have patterns, territories, preestablished routes, and when those patterns are disrupted there's always a reason and he can always backtrack to the source. It's as good as hearing a call-in on a police scanner.

Better, even, because he doesn't have to *carry* a police scanner, or wait for some bystander to put in a 911 and for dispatch to gather the information and then pass it on to the police... and then wait for his brain to sort out the location. Maps and street names are all fine and good *on paper*; they just don't translate so well into three-dimensional space. Navigation is easy when he's on the move, but if he has to think about where he's going beforehand, then he has to *go on* thinking about it for an embarrassingly long time before it clicks.

And by then, two times out of three he reaches the scene too late.

So Spider-Man watches the birds instead.

Flock Six rounds the building he's on, counter-clockwise, twice before moving on. Situation normal.

Pigeons are curiously well camouflaged for an urban environment, with all their shades of

pavement-grey, and their flashing iridescent heads so close in hue and sparkle to TV screens behind apartment windows. Personal theory: It makes the searingly white seagulls jealous and self-conscious, and that's why seagulls are so much louder and crankier and more likely to divebomb outdoor café tables to steal french fries, even when people are still sitting at the table.

Sparrows are quieter and less useful for crimefighting, but that's only because they're harder to tell apart, and harder to see from a distance. A sparrow isn't an entity so much as a series of twitches, and when they do group flight they *always* look like they're panicking. If they have readable patterns like the other birds, Peter has yet to pick up on them.

Peter would be a sparrow, he thinks. Maybe a house sparrow, or a chipping sparrow at a stretch. Spider-Man, conversely, definitely a bird of prey. He flips through his mental catalog of raptor species to try and find a good fit.

The wind is at his back and for once he smells Deadpool before hearing him. Peter pulls his mask back down to filter the air — Deadpool is not the nicest smell, although Peter's willing to give him a bonus point or two for at least smelling like something *organic*.

Roadkill, Peter thinks, is also organic.

His fingers keep twitching at the hem of his mask, tap-tapping at his throat, tug-tugging at the fabric. "Hey," says Peter.

"Aww, you heard me? But I was all full-stealth ninja mode! I was totally gonna get the drop on you this time and I had this fuckin' sexy-ass victory dance all planned out and everything! ...I could show you anyway if you want, but without an actual victory it might fall kinda flat. I'm more of a method actor." His footsteps come closer. "How the hell d'you even do that anyway? You cheated, didn't you. You're a fuckin' cheater! Not all of us have sensey-Spidey-vibrators or whatever the fuck it is you call 'em. 'S no fair. Some of us actually have to *try*!"

"I don't need my Spidey-sense to smell you from a mile away."

"So, what, you got like heightened senses or some shit? Like Wolvy or Hornball?"

"His name is Daredevil, and no. You just need to shower more. Or maybe stay downwind once in a while."

"You shouldn't have said that. Now I know how to sneak up on you. I thought you were supposed to be smart."

"You'll never sneak up on me," says Peter, flatly. "I have other ways of detecting you."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Sorry, that's above your clearance level."

"Oo, cloak and dagger, I like it. Look out, international man of mystery over here. *The name's Bond... Spider-Bond*. Hey, you should totally start wearing a tux on patrol. That'd be hot. Do you even have a tux? I could get you one. But if I do then I wanna be there when you're in your skivvies at the tailor. Also you have to promise to actually wear it, and let me take pictures. The internet would lose its *shit* over that. And you could, like, mod your web-shooter thingies to look like a handgun and do all those cool poses." Deadpool plops down next to him, a good three feet between them, and dangles his feet over the edge, holding up one of his hands like a fake gun and pointing it around at imaginary TV cameras. Arching his back as he twists around in the way that Peter's learned means he thinks he's being sexy.

Peter laughs. “Stop posing. You look more like a Charlie’s Angel reject than 007.”

Deadpool grins and looks Peter up and down. “Hey, y’know, that could work, too... You sure as shit got the body for one of those outfits. Though I’m guessing you’d be more into the catsuits from the remake than the original stuff.” He wedges his hands under his thighs and wriggles his body around like a kid who has to pee. “Ohhhh man, oh man, I totally need to see you in a Farrah Fawcett wig now! I think I might actually have one? Remind me to bring it next time. You could *rock* that shit! It’d look totally natural too!”

“...Did you just say I look like a girl?”

“I said you look hot, but hey, however you wanna work it. Dat ass is too fine for any one gender.”

Peter tilts his head, giving that a moment’s consideration. “I’m quite comfortable with my gender identity,” he decides, “and would rather you leave it alone.”

“You never let me have any fun.” Deadpool crosses his arms and his pout is so exaggerated it looks cartoonish even with the panda-mask obfuscating his face.

And since the start, that’s probably the main reason Peter keeps letting Deadpool try to “get the drop” on him instead of taking his leave every time he hears (or smells) the merc approaching. The guy *is* a cartoon character, and except when one or both of them is having a Bad Brain Day — the definition of which is *considerably* different between the two — Peter never has to second-guess the merc’s social cues. For all the *noise* of him, he still gives Peter fewer stress-headaches than just about anyone else.

Which isn’t to say that being around him is *easy*, exactly.

Deadpool is definitely a seagull if ever Peter saw one.

But he’s slightly less heartless, or has slightly more brain, because that time he grabbed Peter’s ass (without warning, and on a Bad Brain Day, thank you very much) and sent Peter into an instant, admittedly dramatic, shutdown, fetal position and biting himself and the whole humiliating nine yards... Okay well first of all, it freaked Deadpool out so much that he actually *fled*, not just the alley but NYC itself, and didn’t show up again for eight months. And second of all, since he’s come back, he’s kept his hands and every other part of him very much to himself and is always so, so careful to keep his distance.

He even spent a few visits systematically testing Peter’s personal bubble by trial and error — carefully, dropping jokes the whole way — until he located its edge. And while Deadpool’s usually right *at* that edge, bouncing off the two-and-a-half-foot radius like a red rubber ball, he hasn’t breached it once.

Okay well, except that time he bodyslammed Peter into a water tower, but that was to take a bullet meant for Spider-Man. And it was just the once. And it was to *take a freaking bullet* for him.

Despite the flirting that’s so open and vulgar that Peter’s brain just cannot with that bullshit (but that the Avengers have explained away as “That’s just how he is sometimes, ignore it”), Deadpool’s not *pushing* it. Peter’s met Spidey fangirls who were a thousand times worse and never even knew how close they came to getting themselves punched or webbed to a streetlamp. (God help him if that ever *does* happen. Everyone has a camera on their phone and Jameson wouldn’t even have to distort the truth to slander him if he lashes out at a fan.)

It also doesn’t hurt Peter’s opinion of Deadpool that he usually comes bearing food. He’s a seagull

who shares. Possibly the *only* seagull who shares, ever, in the history of the world.

Two crows swoop up, take up opposing positions on the roof across the street, and start yelling at each other.

“So what’re the little birdies saying tonight?” Deadpool asks, struggling at one of his pouches until he yanks free an impressively smooshed paper bag with grease stains leaking through on every side.

“Tweet tweet and caw caw, mostly.”

“Heh. Baby boy’s got jokes. Who knew?”

“I’ll have you know I’m hilarious.”

“Sure sure, Spidey, whatever helps you sleep at night.” Deadpool slaps the battered bag down next to Peter’s leg and starts digging out a second from a different pouch. The second bag is far less smooshed, obviously more care taken with that one, but that’s just pragmatic. Deadpool eats tacos and Peter eats burritos, and tacos — besides being *clearly inferior* due to their hard shells’ downright offensive texture-clash — aren’t as resilient in transport.

And Deadpool always gets Peter’s order with guac even though it’s extra and Peter never asked for it. It is medically impossible to be ungrateful in the face of that.

As he peels back the foil on the first flattened burrito he hears Flock Two wing down the cross-street behind him, a bit earlier than usual but not so early that it means trouble. Flock Two is his favorite because seven of the pigeons are piebald. He’s secretly named the piebalds after the seven dwarves.

Deadpool shoves his panda-mask up to his nose and his first bite is so enthusiastically aggressive it sends taco-shell shrapnel flying in every direction.

It took a while for Deadpool to get around to doing that — to pull back any part of his costume in front of Spider-Man even though his identity’s no secret — but whatever eventually convinced him to change his mind, the result of the “big reveal” was apparently less climactic than whatever Deadpool was expecting. (Peter just tilted his head at the pock-marked chin a while, said “You haz a texture,” and calmly ate his burrito-with-guac while Deadpool stared at him like he was a moron. It was a very familiar sort of stare, and it stopped fazing Peter years ago.)

Peter scrapes leaked bean juice from his own chin with the back of a wrist. His stubble’s long enough that he can feel it catch and drag against the fabric on his arm, surprising him. He pauses and counts the days backwards until he realizes he hasn’t shaved in six days. Again. Dammit. He scrubs hard at his jawline as if he could just rub the hair off with his palm.

“You growin’ a beard there, Spidey? Oh god. Are you secretly a hipster? Please say no. I don’t think I could hang out with you if you were a hipster. Or — oh! — maybe you’re just goin’ for the Scruffy White Guy trope? That’s weird, Spidey. I thought for sure you were more Boy Scout. Like a baby Captain America. Seriously, that guy’s so clean-cut and shoe-shined you could eat off him, like...”

Peter chews patiently until Deadpool finishes entertaining that mental imagery.

“...No way, cats are fuckin’ *gross*,” says Deadpool. Which is pretty much what Peter expected him to say. Not the cats specifically, but the complete non-sequitur. “They puke more often than a chemo patient and then lick every inch of themselves *with the same tongue*. And people are like,

‘Oh, but cats are so much cleaner than dogs!’ I call bullshit. Yeah, a dog’ll eat its own shit half the time but at least it has the decency to clean its fuckin’ mouth chewin’ on a stick or something.”

“Dogs’ mouths carry less bacteria than cats’ or humans’,” Peter says. “Human mouths are one of the worst. But Komodo dragons have so much bacteria in their mouths that people die from infected Komodo bites almost as reliably as they die from venomous snake bites.”

“What about spider bites?” Deadpool asks, leaning closer but not breaching boundaries.

“Death is pretty rare, even in Australia,” says Peter. “Superpowers, much rarer.”

“D’aww, I knew you were one in a million!”

“More like one in seven-point-three billion,” says Peter.

“That’s... oddly specific.”

“Current world population. Last time I checked, anyway.”

“I knew that.”

“No you didn’t.”

Deadpool pauses, listening to something else. “Liar,” he says to the air over his left shoulder. “Yes you are! If you had pants I’d light ‘em up. You can’t know stuff that I don’t. It doesn’t work that way. You’re just tryin’ to look good in front of Spidey.”

Peter wads the rest of the burrito into his mouth and pulls the other out of the soggy bag. “Your brain lying to you?”

Deadpool picks a limp shred of lettuce from his third taco and pitches it sullenly over the edge of the roof. “*Again*,” he says.

Peter rolls the burrito between his palms, watching the light flash off the foil and drinking in the crinkly sound. “I know those feels,” he says.

“*And that’s why we’re totally soulmates!*” Deadpool screams.

Peter drops the burrito to slam his hands over his ears, flinching away, eyes screwed shut. The day’s been too long already — Jameson already yelled at him for twenty minutes during what was supposed to be Peter’s lunch break and he *swears* if that bastard calls him a “retard” one more goddamn time he’s going to ask Matt to help him file a lawsuit...

Deadpool could scream another day, maybe, or after Peter’s had more time with just him and the wind, but he can’t absorb a punch like that right now.

Which probably means he shouldn’t patrol at all tonight. He can deal with just about anything if he’s braced for it, and on patrol he’s always braced... but he’s *always* braced around Deadpool, too, and...

Actually, he wasn’t this time so much. Braced. He wasn’t braced.

Around Deadpool.

Um.

Breach of protocol. *Breach of goddamn protocol!*

Deadpool is waving a hand at him when he slits his eyes open. *Sorry*, he signs. *Excited. Forgot. Stupid. Sorry. Don't hate me.*

Peter forces down a breath and pulls his hands away from his ears. *Air horn asshole*, he signs back, not because he has to but because it just feels better than talking right now.

Sorry sorry sorry sorry—

Long day, Peter interrupts. *Shields at ten percent, captain.*

Deadpool nods and knocks on the side of his own head like it's a door. Then he hums. *Kirk or Picard?* he asks.

Picard, says Peter, happy for the subject change.

Deadpool grins. *Data or Spock?*

Spock, says Peter. *Obvious.*

Cool ranch or nacho cheese?

Peter laughs. "Mesquite barbecue," he answers out loud.

"Oh, you just gotta be different," says Deadpool. "You really are a hipster, aren't you? Turn back before it's too late! *It's a trap!* I'm tellin' ya, Spidey, Farrah Fawcett hair would look way better on you than a fedora."

"...What about both at the same time?"

"I'd probably jizz in my pants," he says with a shrug and no hesitation whatsoever.

Peter has nothing to say to that. *That's just how he is sometimes, ignore it.* He watches the people-traffic below and the Dave Matthews song "Ants Marching" gets stuck in his head on repeat.

Deadpool shifts around and pulls in a stuttering breath. "Dogs or cats?" he asks in what, for him, is practically a whisper.

"You already know the answer to that."

"Dogs all the way!" Deadpool cheers with a fist pump. He looks pointedly at the fallen burrito. "You gonna eat that?"

"Not right now. Why, do you want it?"

"I got it for you."

"I know. But do you want it?"

"But I got it for *you*."

Peter makes an exasperated noise. "This is really not that complicated. Do you want this burrito?"

Deadpool whines, and squirms, and says, "...Maybe?"

"This isn't multiple choice. There is no 'none of the above'. It's true-false. You want this burrito

right now. Yes or no?”

“Nnnnyyes?”

“Then eat it.”

“But I *got* it for *you*!”

“Oh my god, Deadpool!” He grabs the mushed burrito with one hand, snatches Deadpool’s wrist with the other, and physically forces the food into his hand. “It’s like pulling teeth. Eat the fucking burrito.”

But instead, the big badass merc just sits there like a catatonic frog, the shiny object in his hand unnoticed, staring at Peter.

“What now?” says Peter.

Deadpool swallows so hard Peter can hear it over the wind. “You... you *touched* me?”

“Seems that way, yes.”

“But...”

“I can touch you,” Peter says. “You can’t touch me. I don’t make the rules.”

“Whaa...?”

Peter sighs. “Use your words,” he says, slowly.

Instead, unsurprisingly, Deadpool slams both fists against his thighs so hard the burrito squelches out of its foil and splats across the rooftop. The blast radius of the rice is impressive.

“That is *so* not fair!” says Deadpool, and Peter gives him credit, because whatever bug is up his ass this time, even now he’s exercising considerable volume control. “Why didn’t you say something sooner? You could’ve been touching me this whole time? Oh my fucking hopscotching *christ*, Spidey, you need to be touching me *all the time*!”

“No I don’t.”

Deadpool harrumphs and sticks out his tongue. “I don’t make the rules.”

“No, you don’t, smartass. You don’t get to tell me what I do.”

“Oh, but *you* can make with the grabby-grabby all you want, except when *I* want it.”

...Hang on a second, time out, pause. There are several possible ways to interpret that: most severely, that Peter just violated Deadpool’s consent. But Spider-Man saves people all the time and he knows what they look like when that kind of thing happens, and Deadpool doesn’t look like that at all. He mostly looks like a tantruming kid... even though he got what he wanted? Wait, what?

“You *said* you wanted the burrito.”

“Yeah, I’ve also said I want your hands down my pants, but you’re not particularly forthcoming with *that* now, are you?”

“Sex and Mexican takeout are not the same thing,” says Peter.

“To you, maybe.”

And that gives Peter pause, because... well, because Deadpool. “Hold up,” he says. “Does that mean you’ve equated buying me burritos with some kinda sexual exchange?”

“Wha—? Pff. *Pfffft*. No.”

“Because that makes no sense, and even if it made sense to you — which, the more I think about it the more likely that seems — not telling me about it is clearly removing the ‘informed’ from the ‘consent’.”

Deadpool kicks his heels against the side of the building. “Do flirting and obvious come-ons count as a ‘sexual exchange’?” he asks, putting finger-quotes around the phrase.

“Pretty sure not. I think that’s more like how people *ask* for sexual exchange.”

“Then no,” says Deadpool. “I buy you burritos so you’ll hang out with me and maybe hold still long enough for me to keep ‘asking’.”

Peter snorts. “You’d do better to actually just *ask*,” he says.

There’s a pause, in which Deadpool does not ask.

...Again with the *Huh?! Peter actually presents him with an opportunity to blast off some creatively lascivious bullshit and he doesn’t take the bait?*

Maybe he prefers the challenge of working it into parts of the conversation where it doesn’t belong?

Maybe he’s arguing with his boxes again. He doesn’t always do it out loud.

Seems most likely.

Peter’s never sure whether it’s okay for him to break into those internal conversations, but Deadpool never complains when he does. And from everything Deadpool’s said about the boxes, and based on what Peter can infer from the times when Deadpool responds to them out loud, frankly, the boxes sound like assholes.

Everyone is an asshole to Deadpool, whether he’s around to hear the abuse or not. Even the Avengers. Peter’s never liked that about the Avengers. *He kills people, Spider-Man*, they like to say.

Yes, well, Peter’s killed people too.

He kills people for money, Spider-Man, they like to say.

Yes, and Clint kills people because he’s ordered to, and Natasha kills people because they’re in the way of her mission, and Thor’s killed people for “glory” (which, as far as Peter can tell, is another way of saying “for fun”), and Bruce has killed people by simple proximity, and Tony’s killed people basically to appease his own ego...

And Peter’s killed people just because they were bad guys and they pissed him off and he lost it.

How any of their reasons or excuses for killing people are morally superior to Deadpool’s, Peter cannot fathom. And oh, he has tried. But as far as he can tell, the much simpler motivation of killing for money just makes the Avengers uncomfortable because they’re kind of lying to

themselves about their own behavior.

Deadpool's motivation at least gives him the benefit of being able to afford endless amounts of burritos, with guacamole.

"..I know it's stupid. I know it'll never," Deadpool mutters, not to Peter.

So he *is* talking to the boxes. And they are being assholes. Again.

Peter wishes he knew what they were saying so he could argue with them for a while in Deadpool's place. Peter's rather talented at arguing. The way you win is simple: don't get upset. The person who gets upset loses, every time, even if they made better points at first. And the way to not get upset is to keep it extremely logical. Logic keeps Peter calm, and simultaneously drives the other person out of their mind. Sort of fun, actually. It is not a game he plays with Bruce.

"Not my fault he's like that!" Deadpool's saying. "...No, if we're lookin' specifically at brains here, I'm *pretty fucking certain* he's got the advantage. If anything that'd make *him* the Creepy McCreepy-Pants."

Whatever the internal reply is to that, it makes Deadpool's face fall, hard.

They're probably arguing about Captain America; if Deadpool was spectrum, Cap would be his third special interest, after combustibles and Mexican food — but Peter wants them to stop arguing anyway. And now that Deadpool's gotten mopey, another quickdraw subject change won't do the trick; it'll only send him packing until Thursday. No, the smart thing here is to backtrack to where their own conversation left off, to make a loop in Deadpool's thoughts that cuts off the chunk of time where the boxes were talking.

(And people say Deadpool has no predictable patterns.)

"I don't like hanging out with you because I get to eat burritos," Peter says. "I eat the burritos because I like hanging out with you."

Deadpool twitches, like Peter just snuck up on him even though he's been sitting here the whole time.

"I... wha?"

"Well I mean, I like the burritos, too," says Peter. "Keep 'em coming. Please. I can only afford an expensive meal every other week, and it has to be pizza."

"Pizza's not expensive," Deadpool says, speaking much more slowly than usual. "Neither is this." He flicks at the destroyed burrito.

"If it's more than a box of Velveeta, it's expensive," says Peter. "And I only like the deep dish, and that's like ten bucks extra."

"...Why?"

"Presumably because it's like three times the dough as thin crust and financially speak—"

"No, I mean the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"The other thing! Before the pizza!"

Peter puzzles for a second. “You mean why do I like hanging out with you?”

“Yeah. That. I mean. Okay I’ve actually been meaning to ask you that for, like, *months*, but I mean. What the hell? I know you’re, like... *different*, in the head, y’know, but you’re not crazy and you’re definitely not stupid so. I mean. What the fuck?”

“Um. I like hanging out with people I like.”

Deadpool clutches at his masked eyeballs and makes a sound that... well, yes, is very much a seagull type of sound. “God, Spidey, why d’you gotta be so...”

“...Stupid?” Peter supplies. “Impossible? Oblivious? Obtuse? Rational?”

“No! No no god no — well okay maybe the last one but—“

“You want to know why I’d voluntarily hang out with a possibly schizophrenic soldier of fortune, much less enjoy the company,” Peter says. “When I’m a superhero wearing the same colors as the American flag and am ostensibly a source of unvarnished moral goodness in the world. And when I have a working relationship with most of the Avengers. And when I spend most of my free time trying to save lives while you spend your professional life working to end them, and when we’ve gotten in each other’s way about that and fought each other a few times and pissed each other off.”

He gives Deadpool a moment to respond, to confirm or correct, but evidently he can’t, and gives no indication of wanting to. Peter waits anyway.

Eventually Deadpool signs, *Talk*.

“My brain’s weird,” says Peter, tapping the side of his head. “And your brain’s weird but in a different way. You take my weirdness mostly in stride, and you don’t push my boundaries except for that one time, and you talk a little different to me than how I’ve heard you talk to other people — not like you’re talking *down* to me, but like you’re learning to speak Spider-Man. Which is more than most people bother to do and that’s... really cool of you actually. And I think I’ve got a lot of your weirdness figured out pretty well, too, or at least well enough to deal with. We get each other’s jokes and references and I bet you know as well as I do that that’s not easy to find. I like to think I’m less of a hypocrite than the Avengers when it comes to things like killing people, so except when we have a direct conflict of interest in that regard, honestly? It really doesn’t bother me that much.

“Besides,” Peter adds, watching the one remaining crow on the roof across the way wing up to the top of the water tower and caw a few empty times. “You hang out with *me*.”

“Uh, yeah... the stairs that go up? They go down, too.”

“No, I mean you actively seek me out, and you shoot the shit with me, and you don’t spend the whole time looking for an excuse to take off. And you’re not family so you’re not obligated. ...It’s weird. The good kind of weird.”

That face Deadpool’s making now means surprise and confusion, Peter’s sure of it. “Dude, people love you! Don’t you have, like, a million friends?”

“I have a million fangirls,” says Peter. “One of my friends died and the other one went crazy. Like, *crazy-crazy*, not like you-crazy. I have an aunt who doesn’t know I’m Spider-Man and who seems to be laboring under the delusion that I’m still a kid. I know the Avengers, but I’m not an Avenger, and I’m pretty sure we’re not friends. I think they see me as more of a stray cat who sleeps under your porch sometimes and who you leave bowls of kibble out for, and who you worry about when

it snows, and who kills your mice for you, but you don't let it in the house because it'll scratch up your couch, and you don't give it a name because you don't want to feel too bad when it stops showing up one day."

Peter looks at Deadpool's shoulder. "I think we're friends," he concludes.

He lets the pause slide slowly by. Other people always say they're surprised when Deadpool goes more than thirty seconds without talking, but when it's just the two of them, Deadpool's quiet a lot. ("A lot" by Deadpool-standards, not by Peter-standards.) Peter doesn't mind. He knows that sometimes he says things that other people need time to figure out. Not nearly as often as the reverse, but Peter resolved a long time ago to always give people however much processing-time they need, not to steamroller them the way they do Peter. This rule is not in effect during immediately dangerous situations, but other than that.

(And he knows every one of the Avengers would qualify *this* as an immediately dangerous situation based purely on the fact that he's within choking-range of Deadpool, but the Avengers are kind of stupid sometimes.)

His eye shifts from Deadpool's shoulder to his elbow, and he's thinking that it's been enough seconds now that there'll be another change of subject, and he starts pick-picking at the strap on his left webshooter.

An abrupt movement gets his attention — for a split-second he thinks he miscalculated something and Deadpool's going to bolt — then he sees what Deadpool's hands are doing.

WHAT, he signs in a huge gesture... pause for emphasis... *is your favorite color?*

Peter laughs. *Green*, he says.

"Now I know you're lying," says Deadpool.

"No, it's green."

"Then why the red suit? Is it so the bad guys can't see you bleed?"

"No, that's your version of logic. Mine was based on studies they did about how the average American interprets and responds to different colors. Blue is the most common favorite color and I wanted people to like me, and also it makes people think of authority and order — like how cops wear blue. Red is to let the bad guys know I'll be violent if I have to. Plus there's the whole patriotic flag-colors thing. People tend to respond to that subconsciously even if they don't want to."

"...Sorry, I know you were just saying something smart, but I couldn't hear you over the sound of me picturing your suit in green. I think you could do it. I mean it'd take some getting used to and people wouldn't think I'm you anymore, which maybe now that I think about it is something you might want anyway, but with a few mods it could..."

"Most of the supers who wear green are bad guys," says Peter. "I already get enough bad press as it stands."

"But you gotta do you, Spidey! Be true to who you are!"

"Says the guy who wants me to wear Farrah Fawcett hair."

"That's *different*."

“My choice was deliberate and I stand by it.”

“...Army wears green. That’s patriotic.”

“I don’t want to be associated with the army. I’m a free agent.”

Deadpool laughs. “You and me both, baby boy.”

Tug-tug-tug at the webshooter.

Peter’s brain got stuck somewhere before the subject change. A question occurred to him. And it’s bothering him. Because while his own answer to it seems sound, there’s a chance that some of the data he based it on is inaccurate or incomplete. And that’s always, in every situation, *maddening*. Tug-tug-tug.

“Are we?” Peter asks.

“Absolutely! Free as birds! Card-carrying members of the Fuck You I Do What I Want You’re Not My Real Dad Club!”

“No, I mean.” *Tug-tug-tug*. “Are we friends?”

“Don’t get mushy on me, Spidey.”

“It’s not multiple choice.”

This silence, unlike its predecessors, is excruciating.

Tug-tug-TUG-TUG-TUG—

“If you’re sure that’s what you even want,” says Deadpool.

“But do you? It’s not exactly a one-way—“

“Yeah well *I’m* not exactly the pick of the—“

“I already said I like you and explained why. You tracking me down every Tuesday and Thursday and sometimes Saturday sure as hell makes it seem like you like me too, but I know I can be extremely useful, and have been used. And if that’s your aim then believe it or not I’m actually *fine* with that as long as you’re upfront about it. The Avengers use me and that’s fine, I let them, I *offer* it, common goals and all that. And I like you so I’d probably let you, too, but I really *really* need to know about it beforehand because there’s some stuff I *don’t* want to be used for and I want to have the *choice*. Pretending to be friends to try and sneak around that does *not* end well, for anyone involved. Just because you can’t stay dead doesn’t mean I can’t or won’t kill you repeatedly if you bullshit me like that.”

Deadpool doesn’t move for a second or two. “...Christ on a cracker. Dammit, Spidey, you have no idea how much I wish I could hug you right now and that you’d actually not freak out about it.”

“Yeah, well. Same. But still no.”

“Okay so — to be reeeaaally honest I wouldn’t put it past me to bullshit someone like that. I’m actually pretty fuckin’ sure that I do it all the time. Like, *all* the time. But to give myself the benefit of the doubt. because who the fuck else is gonna — the ol’ memory ain’t always that reliable, y’know? Too many headshots. Really fucks a guy up. Grey matter’s squishy and splattery to begin with. Not all of us get to have computers in our skulls.”

Peter glares at the crumpled edge of Deadpool's mask.

"Buuut that said, there's... kinda not much I want from you. For realsies. I mean I totally wanna fuck you into the asphalt until the only word you can remember is my name, but, y'know. You got that whole no-touchie thing goin' on, so..."

Deadpool tilts his head and stares into the middle distance, and Peter waits, again, for him to finish with his mental imagery, and just hopes that when it's done Deadpool can find his way back to the thread of conversation and just *answer the damn question already*.

"Of course I like you," Deadpool says, and Peter can't read the inflection because it's so, so quiet. "'Course we're friends. Dumbass. I think the sun'll probably explode the day you ask if I wanna be pals and *I turn you down*. I mean. You're cooler than a chest freezer stuffed with cucumbers!"

Peter blanks out a little.

"I have been called many things," he says, and he can hear how monotone his own voice is, which, according to popular opinion, is really saying something. "'Cool' is not often among them. Just from the fangirls, and they don't know shit about me."

Deadpool snorts, and pulls his mask back down, smoothing out the panda circles, which means he's going to leave soon. "Then I think it's pretty fuckin' obvious," he says, "that the rest of 'em don't know shit about you either. Fuck 'em. Only don't really because ew."

By the time Peter figures out what all the parts of that even meant, Deadpool's gone.

And, okay, it sounds very sappy and *extremely* pathetic even just inside his own head, but... damn, Peter has a friend again. A probably-for-real, no-expectations, explicitly confirmed friend. Seriously: *whoa*.

Cool.

...This'll take some mental reorganization.

Flock Nine spooks up from the wrong place, the birds' flight patterns so erratic one of them hits a window in panic. Peter can think later. Spider-Man aims his web (signs an upside-down *I love you* to the city) and swings off. Go time.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't want to start sharing this until it was completely written, but then I thought I should get in here before the inevitable flood of post-movie Deadpool fics. Also it's been a WIP forever, and you know what helps make writing happen? COMMENTS and KUDOS, THAT'S WHAT.

Especially since, y'know, it's the first fic I'm posting here.

Next chapter: Less jibba-jabba, more plot.

All in a Day's Work

Chapter Summary

In which Spidey swings into action, Peter is aggravated with local news coverage, and the author doesn't know shit about explosives or terrorist psychology.

Chapter warnings: Possibly disordered eating, systemic racism, media distortions of the truth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Ants Marching” makes a pretty awesome soundtrack to patrol by, especially that opening riff. Especially at the beginning of the night. Even if he’s only playing it in his head. There’s a lot of different rhythms going on there and all of them are bouncy, so it’s easy to time his thwips to the mental music, letting physics and optimism propel him forward and letting his body handle the anxious details.

His body got a *lot* better at knowing what it’s doing after he got his powers. Intellectually Peter knows he’s still awkward, but when he’s being Spider-Man, he’s awkward with so much speed and agility that people don’t really seem to notice.

Relinquishing control and learning to trust his new-and-improved body not to walk him into doorframes or concuss him getting into cabs — much less to do the arachnid trapeze act and *fight people* — that was the scariest part of the whole transformation. Once he realized the venom wasn’t going to kill him, anyway.

His powers do most of the work for him, including some decision-making; Peter maintains conscious control of his webs and the overall plan of attack, and that’s about it. He doesn’t even watch his mouth. When the mask is on, so many other things take off running. It’s kind of great. Usually. Mostly.

Details are what Peter is good at; Spider-Man lets the details see to themselves. He *has to*, because there’s no time to sort everything out consciously, and when he’s in a particularly honest mood, that’s *still* the scariest part about being Spider-Man. Worse than the public attention or the possible consequences of having his identity revealed or the getting-shot-at.

He can shoot, too, after all. Having fired a few guns at the range in Tony’s basement, he knows as indisputable fact that webs are more fun than bullets. A bullet just puts holes in things. A web is much more versatile. And quieter.

So much quieter.

He should start a list, make a poster out of it: “Everything I need to know in life, I learned from being Spider-Man.” Webs are better than bullets, pigeons are better than police scanners, and Spidey-sense is better than GPS.

The tingles tell him to turn left. He feels like singing along to his internal soundtrack but doesn’t

know the lyrics because he doesn't have any Dave Matthews on his iPod. He'll have to pirate it when he gets home tonight.

He lands on the side of a post office just as the song breaks for the bridge, and has a look around. This is definitely the place. He doesn't see anyone in particular — Spidey-sense always lets him know the second his eyes graze over someone about to do harm. But it keeps humming low in the background, rattling up against the music that refuses to stop playing even though their rhythms clash into a confusing mess and *that's really very distracting, brain, you can stop now, please and thank you.*

His brain responds to the request by restarting the song from the top. *Thanks, jerk*, Peter thinks.

Okay, deep breath, focus. No immediate suspects? Take stock of the terrain.

Post office: federal building, lots of prison time for not much value; unlikely. Coffee shop: closed up for the night, cash register; possible. Campus bookstore, also closed; no one ever robs bookstores except to shoplift (although personally, if Peter were the villainous type that'd probably be his second target, right after the Apple store and right before that one hot dog cart near the library... he would not be a villain worth chasing, really, and Peter thinks he shouldn't feel so embarrassed to realize this). Across the street: nondescript office building, alley, furniture store, tailor, UPS shipping center, pharmacy, another alley, soup kitchen —

Whoa. Spidey-sense has picked its favorite. Two dollars on the soup kitchen, to win. (And two more on the alley, to place.)

He swings across to the soup kitchen and edges along near the roof, around the corner and into that alley. He plays a quick game of hot-and-cold with his Spidey-sense until he zeroes in on a very fidgety person trying to hide behind a dumpster and shrugging on an unusually lumpy ballistic vest.

Web first, ask questions later. He pins the person's right hand to the alley wall, and the left to the dumpster, where it was reaching for a trench coat folded over the dumpster lid.

He lights down. "A trench coat?" he says. "Trench coats are never good. Also: way to be a walking cliché, man."

The person — a man, white and middle-aged and sporting the kind of half-grown beard that looks like something from inside the shower drain — jerks against the webbing, but doesn't say anything. Spider-Man folds his arms and waits, because they always have *something* to say, even if it's just creative profanity.

The trapped man stops struggling and stares at him.

Aaand stares at him.

Spidey clears his throat. "Well? What have you got to say for yourself, young man?" And he's really hoping for an answer, because aside from the crappy-looking Kevlar and the insistent testimony of his Spidey-sense, he's got nothing on the guy, and literally no idea what he was trying to get up to.

"I have regretted so much that regret has no more meaning," says the man. "I will burn the bridge behind me."

"Uh. ...What? Is that from a song or something?"

The man strains at the webbing. Instead of jerking around this time, he pulls with steady pressure, using his elbows against the brick for leverage.

Spider-Man drops his arms with a world-weary sigh. “Yeah, good luck with that. Okay, come on, help me out here. You’re clearly up to something and this will go a lot faster if you just monologue your nefarious plan for me. I really suck at twenty questions.”

The tingles jolt up his spine at a faint creaking sound — by the time he registers what it is, the man’s ripped free of the webbing with enough momentum leftover to take a heavy swing at Peter; it glances off his ribs as he leaps aside.

“Augh! Hey man, you break it, you buy it!” Spidey bounces off the wall and comes down on the guy from above feet-first. Hears the crack and knows it’s the collarbone.

The man drops to a knee with a horrible yell, hand clutching the break.

“I’m not buying that, though,” says Spidey, pointing at the collarbone. “I’m broke, and also, ew.” He kicks the man over. Head bounces on the concrete, hard — the screaming stops, and for a second, so does Peter’s heart.

But no. On second look, there’s no blood, the man’s still breathing and blinking his eyes. Just stunned.

Spidey webs the guy’s legs together, and webs his clutching hand to the broken collarbone, and opens his mouth to ask another question and —

“Wait.” He toes at the vest. “This isn’t a BPV,” he mutters. “What — *holy jalapeños* are you *insane*?”

He shouts the question from his new and sudden position high up the alley wall, and doesn’t remember jumping there. His skin feels a little numb, and a lot prickly. “Why the hell are you wearing a bomb? Why the hell are you wearing *a bunch* of bombs?”

The man lets out a long groan that ends in a whimper, then he punctuates it with a grunt of — apparently — defiance, because he lifts his free hand — shaking, because it’s the arm with a *fractured collarbone* — and reaches toward his navel and what looks suspiciously like a switch.

“Gah!” Spider-Man throws the web like a baseball, knocking the hand away and sticking it to the ground far, far away from the switch. No switch for you. Switches *bad*.

For a few moments, Peter just clings to the wall and gulps down air. This is weird. This is really, really weird. Spider-Man has stopped suicide attempts, and he’s stopped (or narrowly avoided, or failed to avoid, or rescued people from) bombs, but throw the two together and you get something that makes *no sense*.

Okay, well. Take a breath there, Parker. The concept is not new.

But how exactly do you *deal* with the situation? How do you balance the equation with a variable of Spider-Man?

Low in his throat, Spider-Man growls. Ah, anger. Anger’s easy.

...No, not anger. Close, but different. He fumbles around for the word.

Indignation.

That's the one.

Slowly, deliberately, he walks down the wall and up to the pinned man, whose breathing is erratic and whose pupils are dilated. (Is it the pain or the concussion, or were his pupils blown before? He could be on something. Amphetamines? That would explain how he was able to rip through the webbing.) The man lets out a suffocated whimper with each ragged exhale. Almost the same sound as that dog Peter found once who'd been hit by a car and then died before he and Aunt May could get it to a vet.

Spider-Man is not feeling nearly so charitable toward the beast making that sound now, here, at his feet.

He aims his web at the man's face. "What was your target?" he says. "The post office?"

The man swallows, takes a few panicky gasps. "I... have regretted so much that regret has no—"

Spider-Man kicks him in the hip. A little harder than he meant to, but he's *really freaking jumpy* right now, okay? The joint dislocates with a deep pop. Another scream; Spidey winces until it's done, then rubs the back of his neck, and has to consciously stop himself from picking at his webshooter. "Never mind," he says. And he crouches down to examine the bomb-vest.

He's picked up more information about how these things work than he's entirely comfortable with. He's no expert, but he knows enough to know that this is a piece of crap. Firecrackers, really. There's only one line connecting the detonator to the IED and, when he puts his fingertips on the side of the detonator, he can't feel the faint buzz of electrical current that he can feel when he touches a TV or microwave or plugged-in phone. Which, presumably, means the detonator is "off" and the bombs are rigged to blow when it switches "on", rather than the other way around.

Which, if he's right, is good. Because that means that until the switch is thrown, the detonator is basically ornamental and he can unhook that one lonely wire without, you know. Dying.

He holds his breath, and gives the line a tug.

Nobody dies.

Spider-Man snorts. "Dumbass," he says, standing up and smashing the detonator against the wall. "Even I know you should've just gone with C4." He briefly examines the crumbled guts of the detonator. Basically just a laptop battery and a light switch, a little wiring. "This is like a middle-school science project."

But oh, it would've worked.

And with that thought, the indignation is back. He whirls on the man.

"Dude, I know it's been a decade and a half since 9/11, but seriously, suicide bombing? In *New York*? Not appreciated." Spider-Man tilts his head. "I'm actually giving serious consideration to the idea of leaving you, in your fancy little accessory there, hog-tied at Ground Zero, just to see what they do to you. Ten bucks says the results make national headlines by tomorrow, and FYI, your typical Eastern Standard Time newspaper's print deadline is, oh... about forty-five minutes from now. Actually, you know what, scratch that. I'll do you one better. *Twenty* bucks says you get mentioned on *The Colbert Report* this week. And you know..."

Spidey pauses to web the bomber's mouth shut, because now that his weapon's defused, his resolve has dissipated, and his whimpers were starting to creep perilously close to screaming-territory again and Spider-Man just cannot with the noise right now. "This isn't a paying gig," he

says. “I don’t have money to throw around. I generally don’t make idle threats but I *really* can’t afford to make idle bets.”

The bomber thrashes around for a few seconds and does his best to scream from behind the web-gag.

“Oh, what are you even complaining about,” says Spider-Man. “Yes, a broken clavicle and dislocated hip hurt like a bastard, but the more you kick around and yell the worse it’ll feel. Besides, technically I saved you. You’d be extremely dead right now if a little bird hadn’t told me something was up. Of course, if being alive really bothers you that much, I could be persuaded to go ahead with that Ground Zero plan even if you don’t want to take my bet.”

The bomber’s breathing sounds very wet through all the snot building up in his nose. Gross. He holds that breath for a second or two, then shakes his head.

“No? You want to live?”

A nod.

Spider-Man smiles behind his mask. “Good. I’ll take that as both a thank you for saving your life, and as a promise to be very, very cooperative with the police. Oh, and probably the FBI. I’m assuming they’ll want to talk to you, too. Hmm... and Homeland Security, now that I think about it. Hey now,” he says, because the whimpering’s started again. “Look at it this way. It could be worse. You could’ve fallen under SHIELD jurisdiction. Now *those* guys are nosy, and no one’s even pretending to keep them in check. They’d just black-bag you. And even I don’t know what happens to you after that. I’ve asked the Avengers too, and they don’t know either, so you know it can’t be good. I guess what I’m saying is that really, any way you look at it, I’m doing you a solid here. So don’t, like, squirm around or anything.”

He rips the webbing from the hand pinned to the ground, then re-webs it to the opposite elbow. And covers the arms completely, giving the bomber the strait-jacket treatment, just in case he tries to tear loose again.

Because Spidey always messes up the fireman’s carry when he tries, he just slumps the bad guy over his shoulder like a laundry sack. It’s awkward, but when is anything ever not-awkward? The man screams, muffled, into Spider-Man’s back at the jostling of his busted hip.

Spider-Man drops him in front of the door at the nearest police station. *Right* in front of the door, so that whoever opens it next will smack the bomber in the head before realizing there’s anyone there to smack. The guy could stand to be a little more concussed than he already is.

Peter snickers as he swings away, mood lifting now that the weirdness is over and he’s had his little police-door prank. Subtlety has never worked for him, and neither did those prearranged drop points where he used to dump baddies off before phoning it in to the police. Unless he stuck around to babysit the vanquished, pretty often they managed to wiggle away before the cops arrived for pickup.

Much better this way. Much funnier, too. Since a movie ticket is fourteen dollars at the low end, he’s learned to be opportunistic when it comes to free entertainment.

Peter really, really hopes that when Deadpool tries to sneak up on him on Thursday, they don’t talk about anything serious at all. Just the usual bullshit and topic-hopping and that it. If one of them starts in on something about emotions or personal history or what-have-you, Peter will start a food fight, he decides.

Maybe he'll do that anyway. He'll need something funny to subsist on until this time next week.

Because he's good at making his own entertainment, but it's better with help. Like how sandwiches taste better when Aunt May makes them.

The thought of food makes his stomach cramp so hard that for a second he thinks his Spidey-sense has relocated from his head to his gut — he panics, until he realizes what's actually going on. "I guess I already worked off the burrito," he says to the wind.

It's been a very, very long day, and when he glances down at the people on the street, the thought of having to go down anywhere near them, even for basic superhero duties, makes his brain tantrum and kick around in protest. Okay, so, early night. There's no shame in that. He stopped a *suicide bomber*. That's got to be worth taking the rest of the night off.

He changes direction and starts heading back for his apartment, trying not to think too hard about where he's going. Spidey-sense GPS is only effective when he's chasing down trouble, but the bite also gave him some other, equally nebulous sense of direction that tells him how to get home from anywhere in the city.

Hmm. Maybe Spider-Man isn't a raptor; maybe he's a homing pigeon. That's a little embarrassing.

He's trying to remember what kind of food is still in his fridge. It's a short list. None of the items on that list are as good as a burrito or one of Aunt May's sandwiches. Peter's stomach whines, and he whines back in sympathy. New York can find its way through the rest of the night without his help.

That's right, New York. Screw off. You're on your own. Spidey's hungry.

And when he makes a pit stop to break up a mugging anyway, well, that's only because it's along the way, and because he can't help it.

Peter eats the last packet of ramen and it's not enough by half. The fridge yields only the spoiled remains of a quart of milk and a mostly empty bottle of sriracha that's crusty around the spout. The freezer: four reusable ice packs, an empty ice cube tray, and a dead fly.

He squirts the sriracha straight into his mouth. It's not as hot as people pretend it is, but he hopes it's hot enough to distract his digestive tract from how empty it feels.

It doesn't really work, and gives him dreams that remind him of the more disturbing episodes of *Welcome to Night Vale*.

By five in the morning, his body's made it clear that it's had enough of the broken sleep and isn't interested in making any further attempts at proper rest. Peter calls in sick to the Bugle. His voice is hoarse from insomnia and hot sauce, and he thinks the vocal distortion gives his lie a nice touch of plausibility.

Payday's in two days but the automatic deposit won't go through until Monday. He's hungry *now*.

He weighs his options.

One: Buy groceries on MasterCard, which he won't be able to pay on time and will knock his credit score down another 20 points, further crushing his fantasy of one day owning the ceiling he sleeps under.

Two: Drop in at Aunt May's house (she'll be at work now, but he keeps her key on the same ring as all the others) and raid her pantry for nonperishables. Which would amount to one starving rat stealing another starving rat's stale cheese. And which would invoke the full force of her righteous fury once she inevitably finds out that he made the trip all the way over but didn't stay long enough to actually spend time with her.

Three: Suit up and swing by Avengers Tower to raid *their* pantry for the finest cuisine Tony Stark can get his personal chef to deliver. Which will necessitate interacting with at least some of the Avengers, in addition to requiring an excuse to be there. He's not one of them, after all. *Su casa no es mi casa*.

Well, he did stop a suicide bomber last night. Domestic terrorism is a bit heavier than Spider-Man's usual fare. Maybe they'll want to know about it.

Okay. There's his convenient excuse. But how to segue from that into stealing their food...? Maybe he'll sneak the food first, then deliver the message.

Maybe he'll get extra lucky and they'll all be off on some secret mission. Bruce is the one they're most likely to leave behind and Bruce is easy enough to cope with. Otherwise there's Pepper, who Peter thinks might secretly be a clone of Aunt May — just as intimidating as any of the Avengers, but at least with a behavioral pattern Peter already knows how to navigate.

He brushes his teeth, refills his webshooters, and makes the Tower by seven. The receptionist smiles and asks Spider-Man what his business is today, but presses the access codes to open the special elevator behind her desk before Peter can answer. So he doesn't say anything, just waves awkwardly as he walks past her. She doesn't seem concerned by his behavior. Everyone associated with the superpower crowd knows Spider-Man is a little weirder than most, even if they don't outright know he's spectrum.

Besides, the Tower handles its own security.

JARVIS automatically runs about a thousand creepy invasive scans of everyone who sets foot in the special elevator. The AI can see Peter's face shape, bones, dental records, fingerprints, heat signature, neurological activity, and probably sperm count. "Purely for identification verification," Tony said once, near the beginning. "He keeps the data in heavily encrypted ones and zeroes and the encryption randomizes itself every forty-five minutes. No actual imaging is produced, so even if some bastard were to manage to crack it, they wouldn't find anything intelligible. Only JARVIS knows what you look like and that's the way it'll stay. Unless of course this whiskey can put you in a sharing mood..."

Peter hasn't had a drink in about four years. Spider-Man has never touched the stuff and never will.

"Good morning, Spider-Man," says JARVIS after a few seconds, having finished all his scans.

"Hello, JARVIS."

"Sir, forgive me for prying into your personal affairs, but it appears you've lost over twelve pounds since your last visit, and your stature is not of a type to support that kind of weight loss without negative impact on your health."

"I wasn't aware of the exact number, but I know I'm hungry."

There's a short pause.

“Mister Stark retired approximately two hours ago,” says JARVIS, “and without outside intervention he will remain rather unconscious until at least 2 p.m. Only Miss Potts is awake at the moment, and she is terribly busy. Is your business here today a matter for her immediate personal attention?”

Inwardly, Peter smiles. “It is not,” he says.

“Then may I direct you toward the kitchens for now?”

“Is anyone in the kitchens, or anywhere near them?”

“Of course not, sir.”

“Then yes please, JARVIS, I would be grateful for that.”

“Just a moment, sir.”

Tony *hates* that JARVIS calls Spider-Man “sir”. Everyone else besides Tony is “Mister Barton” or “Miss Potts” but, since JARVIS’ scans can’t detect Peter’s surname, he gets to be the second “sir”. And when Spidey and Tony are in the same room, Peter gets to be the *only* “sir” since JARVIS switches to calling Tony “Mister Stark” to avoid confusion. Tony huffs and calls Spidey a homewrecker.

Peter likes to think that JARVIS finds it as funny as he does.

He steps out of the elevator when it opens and makes his way down the short hall. He knows this particular part of the Tower as well as he knows the route between his apartment and the nearest convenience store. There are four refrigerators, one for each meal of the day and the fourth for snacks, and they’re always filled with home-cooked meals packed into plastic containers with microwaving instructions taped to each lid. A perfectly balanced meal in each box, with basically no effort. *La dolce vita*.

He plucks a container at random from the breakfast-fridge and punches in the microwave numbers as instructed. Grabs a fork from a drawer and spins it between his thumb and forefinger, watching the light flash off the metal tines, as he waits. “JARVIS? Could you let me know if it looks like anyone’s heading this way?”

“Of course, sir. As always.”

JARVIS knows Spider-Man likes to eat alone. (Unless it’s burritos on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but only two people in the world about that, including Peter.)

He wonders if an AI counts, philosophically, as a “real” friend. JARVIS certainly meets all the standard requirements of friendship, at least on paper. He’s programmed to do it, yes, but his programming is flexible, and doesn’t seem that much different from the human “programming” known as personality. Aside from the fact that JARVIS’ programming could be completely rewritten by anyone with the know-how and access.

(People can be rewritten too, though, can't they? Trauma and brainwashing and amnesia and lobotomy and all that good stuff?)

Regardless, Peter wishes he could spend time with JARVIS without the risk of running into Tony or anyone else. JARVIS doesn’t have hands and can’t touch him, but Peter thinks JARVIS wouldn’t consider trying it even if he did and could.

Halfway through his waffles-with-strawberries and sunny-side-up egg and bacon, JARVIS speaks up.

“Not that it isn’t always a delight to have you here, Spider-Man, but as you are not an official member of the Avengers, I’m afraid my programming requires I ascertain that you have some measure of applicable business here, aside from supplementing your diet.”

Peter swallows before answering; it takes a while, because the waffles are freaking *delicious* and he’s wolfing them in forkfuls that are too big for his mouth. “I have a message,” he says. “Or, a report? Information. I have information.”

“Wikipedia has a great deal of information as well. May I ask for the specifics?”

“I stopped a crime last night and it was... unusual,” says Peter. “Maybe it’s not really of interest to Iron Man or any of those guys, but I figured it would be courteous to let them know about it and decide for themselves.”

“How very conscientious of you, Spider-Man.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“Yes and no. While I do believe that the sharing of such information is both admirable and advisable, I also can’t help but notice how quickly you’re making that food disappear.”

Peter swallows the last of the egg and points the fork at the ceiling. “You questioning my motives, JARVIS?”

“If I have learned anything in the service of Mister Stark, it’s that a human being is more often than not operating under the pressure of multiple sources of motivation, often conflicting ones.”

“My motives are not in conflict today.”

“Of course not, sir.”

Peter scowls. “...Sarcasm?”

“Not at all.”

“Are you lying?”

“Perhaps.”

Peter finishes his food and dumps the container down the chute.

“Sir, I couldn’t help but notice...”

“What’s that?”

“Well, only that the nearest person is four floors away from you and no one shows any inclination to move from their current positions, much less to visit the kitchen. ...And that at least half of these meals spoil each week before anyone eats them.”

Peter pauses, spins the fork around. “That’s not very environmentally friendly,” he remarks. “And Tony’s been working so hard on his sustainability PR platform.”

“It would be rather unkind of you to deny him aid in his quest to reduce waste.”

“JARVIS, you are absolutely right, as always.”

“I do try, sir.”

Peter really, really likes JARVIS.

Two reheated meals later, Peter’s stomach is ballooning out the front of his costume, he’s absently humming “Ants Marching”, and the sudden spike in blood sugar has him feeling a bit silly. When JARVIS lets him know that Dr. Banner is awake and waiting for him in the common room, Peter makes his way there via ceiling. He even rides the ceiling in the elevator.

JARVIS doesn’t announce his arrival and Bruce doesn’t see him at first. Spider-Man creeps over until he’s right overhead, and tries to read the headlines on the newspaper spread across Bruce’s knees. Nothing about the suicide bomber. Good thing they didn’t make that bet after all. There was no way he could’ve made it all the way to Ground Zero by deadline anyway. He files it under *Petty Bullets I Have Dodged*.

The usual voyeuristic thrill of seeing-but-not-seen goes dull pretty fast. “Hey, could you turn to the horoscopes?”

Bruce jolts, then looks up at him. He’s smiling but it looks weird. It’s the kind of smile Peter’s seen on dogs who are about to throw up. “Spider-Man,” says Bruce.

“Dr. Bruce Bananer,” says Spider-Man.

“It’s Banner,” says Bruce.

“I know. I like saying ‘Bananer’.”

“You know better than to sneak up on me.”

“I do,” says Spider-Man, unconcerned.

Bruce rubs his eyebrows. “JARVIS said this is a courtesy call, but he’s been known to lie from time to time. Now please tell me the truth. Are you *actually* here with some kind of information, or did you just come to poke the bear? And if it’s the latter, have you considered seeing a qualified therapist about these self-destructive behaviors?”

“It’s the former. I ate too much and it’s making my head feel goofy. Are any of the others coming?”

“Doubtful.” Bruce checks his watch. He’s the only person Peter knows who still wears a watch instead of just using his phone. But it’s silver, and shiny, so Peter supposes he can see the appeal. “It’s not even nine yet.”

“Good.” Peter lets his feet peel away from the ceiling and drops onto the couch opposite the one Bruce is on. “Are you going to do the crossword?”

“Are you going to tell me why you’re here?”

“Rude.”

Bruce folds the paper up, and sticks it under his thigh so *no one* can have it, and stares at Spider-Man.

Peter tugs the fabric of his glove. “I read somewhere once that suicide bombers don’t usually just

up and decide to become suicide bombers,” says Spider-Man. “Someone has to put them up to it.”

Bruce’s eyebrows meet his receding hairline. “Okay...?”

Peter picks at his webshooter and drags one of his feet back and forth across the floor. “That’s what I read, anyway. Is it true?”

“Is it safe to assume that this isn’t just... intellectual curiosity, prompting you to ask this?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ve definitely got my attention.”

“So is it true? Is that how they work?”

“That’s... not really my area of expertise,” says Bruce. “Why don’t you just tell me what happened?” He pauses. “Something did happen, right?”

“Almost. I got there in time.” Spider-Man tells him the story, watching the angle of sunlight slanting in through the floor-to-ceiling windows slide across the floor as he talks. It doesn’t take very long to say everything, but the sun moves faster than most people realize and Peter can tell the difference.

When he’s done, they sit in quiet for a while. Peter glances up for a second to see Bruce jutting his tongue against the inside of one cheek, then looks back to the sunbeams. Tony should really get over his superstitions and fill this place up with homeless cats. They’d be in heaven.

“All right,” Bruce says, “it’s unusual and... alarming, I’ll grant you that. That’s not really the kind of thing you see stateside very often, and as far as I know, it sort of went out of fashion everywhere else a while ago, too.”

“Fashion?”

“It’s not as common as it used to be, that’s all I’m saying.” Bruce leans back and takes off his glasses. Doesn’t clean them, just looks at them. “How can we help?”

Spidey frowns. “Help? With what?”

“Terrorism is a different breed...”

“I know. That’s why I thought you’d want to know about it. I get that it’s not really Avengers-type business, but it’s not really Spider-Man business, either. I happened to be there last night, so of course I did something, but it’s a little bit above my usual pay grade.”

“...Which is why you’re bringing it to us.”

“Right.”

“For help.”

“Wrong.”

“...I’m sorry, I’m confused.”

Spider-Man makes an unhappy noise and drags a hand across the back of his neck. “Okay, look. You guys? Your gig? Alien invasions, A-list supervillains, apocalypse prevention, other things that

start with 'A'. My gig? Local crime and D-list villains. This guy last night? Presuming that he wasn't a deranged lone wolf, and that there may be others — that falls somewhere in between your gig and mine. Therefore, I thought that if I know about it, then you should know about it too. Symmetry."

"Okay, I guess I can understand that much. But what good does it do to tell us about it if you want us to keep our hands off?"

Spidey shrugs. "So you can let me know if you hear anything? So that if it does turn out to be too big for one guy, there are already people aware of the situation who can intervene faster and more efficiently than the cops?"

"You know you don't have to do it alone. Right?"

"It's still local civilian crime. The guy had a Long Island accent. That's my responsibility."

"That still doesn't mean you have to handle it alone. People help each other with their responsibilities. That's what people do. If that weren't the case, the Avengers wouldn't exist."

Hm. "Okay, fair point. But I'm not an Avenger."

"Spidey..."

"I don't want help unless I really need it."

"Yes, and then when you do need it, you still don't want it."

"But I don't refuse it. Not if it reaches that point. Not when other people might get hurt. And I'm telling you that this thing? Is not at that point."

"All right, but if you let us help now then it won't *get* to that point."

Spider-Man tilts his head and squints. "...You think I can't handle this," he says.

Bruce spreads his hands helplessly. "I don't know," he says. "I don't know what 'this' even *is*. And neither do you. It's that last part that concerns me."

"Well, I've told you what I do know. I'll keep you updated on what I find out. If you have any ideas, I'm willing to hear them, but I'll take care of my own fieldwork unless and until I can't." And he crosses his arms, hoping it looks firm and commanding instead of petulant and defensive.

Bruce thumbs the corner of his eye. "I'm going to worry about this, you know."

"Look, if it gets too big for me, I'll come back and very politely ask for help, scout's honor. But come on, Bananer, how am I supposed to improve if I don't challenge myself?"

After a bit of grumbling, Bruce relents. "All right, fine. Fine. Although," he adds, "I can't help but suspect that, maybe, you want our help *now* but, maybe, you're just too proud to admit it?"

"Paging Dr. Jung."

"I mean, the fact that you felt the need to come all the way here in person makes me wonder if you're more anxious than you're letting on."

"I had insomnia again. Felt like getting out of the apartment."

“And you came *here*. You could’ve just emailed about this, that’s all I’m saying.”

“But I can’t access the breakfast-fridge from my laptop.”

Bruce blinks a few times, then laughs. His laugh is just as ponderous and quiet as anything else he does with his voice, downy and soft-edged like the feathers of the barn owl Peter has associated with him.

Peter smiles faintly under his mask.

Still chuckling, and shaking his head now, Bruce draws the paper out from under his leg and offers it to Spider-Man.

He takes it, checks to make sure the crossword hasn’t been done yet, then tucks it under his arm. “You’re my favorite Avenger,” he says.

“Oh, well, if that’s all it takes,” says Bruce.

Peter’s still restless, so he decides to go into work late, even though he got the day off. He really can’t afford to lose the hours. Oh yes, feeling much better, thank you, must’ve been that thing I ate the other night.

Lying makes him feel sick, so he doesn’t have to pretend that his stomach’s still not 100%.

Just after lunch a report about the suicide bomber finally crosses the other copy editor’s desk and Peter sneaks a quick read. The article is irritatingly brief, only six inches, and the phrase “suicide bomber” is nowhere in it (nor is Spider-Man’s name, thank god).

The very short text, however, does manage to find room for the phrase “mentally disturbed” and the phrase “history of psychosis” and the phrase “recently divorced”, all the coded phrases designed to exonerate obvious guilt. Someone in editing even made space for a blurry mugshot of Mr. Scragglebeard himself (Eliot Landon, 46) so that the article isn’t compelled to explicitly state that he’s a white guy.

All of which is to say, the eventual sentencing (assuming there’s even a *conviction*) will be absurdly light, and the police probably aren’t planning to do a very thorough followup to see if there are others — maybe they assume Spidey is already taking care of it.

Which he’ll try to do, of course, but investigative work isn’t his strong suit and he knows it.

Well. This is going to suck. Maybe he shouldn’t have been so kneejerk-defensive about Bruce’s offer to lend a hand. Even if he *wouldn’t* ever live it down.

His irritation builds slowly for the rest of the day. Breakfast works its way through his body and leaves him feeling stretched-out and hollow, until by clock-out he’s so hungry his glands hurt. Still no food, and still no money, and the payroll office made it absolutely clear that he’s no longer permitted advances.

And he knows better than to fall into the trap of using those private payday-advance shops. It’s only one more night of starving (and he did eat more than a full day’s worth early this morning, so it’s not like he’s going to collapse). Avoiding that discomfort isn’t worth jumping into a tank full of loan sharks.

Nothing to do but suit up and swing out, and take it out on someone who deserves it.

He only watches for the birds for ten minutes before getting twitchy and deciding to just strike out on a random patrol.

Wednesday nights are statistically low on crime. Irritation becomes a gnashing rage.

“Tomorrow is burritos,” he tells himself. The wind rips his voice away as he swings. *“Tomorrow. Is. Burritos,”* he insists.

Without warning, his anger deflates, and takes most of his energy with it. He stops, curls up against the side of the nearest convenient building, six or seven floors up. Presses his cheek against the brownstone and closes his eyes, slumping. The city’s carrying on around and below him like a massive colony of partying college kids, drunk and stupid and careless and oblivious and *annoying*.

He zones out, only to have a particular noise begin relentlessly pricking his awareness. Peter whines and rubs his ears against his shoulders one at a time, but the noise is still there. “Go ‘way,” he mumbles into the stone.

It’s singing.

“When I was born, the doctor said, ‘There’s somethin’ wrong inside that baby head.’ When I was a boy in Sunday school, I told ‘em all that they were fools. All in a day’s work, to live and breathe, a sight to see. And so it goes...”

It’s Deadpool.

Peter leans back and looks down over his shoulder. The panda-mask is passing below him, surrounded by milling drunken chatter in too many different languages, but that one voice shoots up out of the din like a lightning rod begging for a strike. And he’s not even being particularly *loud*.

How the hell does he do that?

Before he even knows what he’s doing, Spidey rappels down and trots after him. “Hey!”

Deadpool stops. “Oh, hey, bug-breath. Fancy meetin’ you down here on the ground. What’s up?”

Feed me, thinks Peter’s traitorous brain.

“Do you know the words to ‘Ants Marching’?” says Peter’s traitorous mouth.

“To what?”

Just go with it, Parker. If you’re not going to beg for food, just go with it. “That Dave Matthews song. ‘Ants Marching’. You know it?”

Deadpool sniffs. “I don’t take requests, Spidey.”

“I’m just asking if you know the words.”

“Baby boy, I can’t even *understand* the words. Guy’s about as coherent as a cat in heat. Why?”

“It’s been stuck in my head since yesterday and I don’t know the words either.”

“Can’t help you,” he says with a shrug. “Try Google. So, did you want—“

“I’ll see you tomorrow then?”

“Uh, sure. Yeah. Thursday, right? Don’t tell me where, I like huntin’ around for you. And that way you never know when I’ll show up ‘cause even *I* don’t know when I’ll show up and I’m totally gonna get the drop on you this time, just wait, you’re gonna shit your pants, it’ll be great. Hey, are you—”

“Okay cool.”

“Did... you, uh, did you want—“

“Okay bye.” And Peter vanishes as fast as he can, which, thanks to the super-reflexes, is extremely fast and *in no way* resembles fleeing from his own awkwardness. At all.

At home, he peels off the mask and manages to stay awake long enough to rip an mp3 of “Ants Marching” off of YouTube, but not long enough to listen to it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Stuff's gonna 'splode.

Brave Little Soldier

Chapter Summary

In which the plot rears its ugly head, a bad situation goes really downhill really fast, and the author doesn't know shit about ornithological behavior or hostage situations.

Chapter warnings: Character death, suicide, implied gore, autistic infodumping!, cliffhanger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Whaaat? Why am I a seagull?”

Peter shrugs. “You’re noisy, you stand out in a crowd, you’re reckless, you’re pushy, and you’re always around food or trash or both.”

“Sure, but you could say the same thing about a stray border collie. Why can’t I be a border collie?”

A border collie is easy to train, Peter doesn’t say, although he’s pretty sure Deadpool would take untrainability as a compliment. “A border collie isn’t a bird. It has to be a bird, that’s the whole point.”

Deadpool rams half the taco into his mouth and considers this carefully while he chews in a manner that, Peter has to admit, is pretty similar to the way a dog would eat. “Pterodactyl,” he says at length. “Lemme be a pterodactyl!”

Peter rips off a piece of foil, crumples it into a ball, and bounces it off the side of Deadpool’s head. “I wasn’t including extinct species,” he says, “but if I was, you’d be a dodo.”

“Ouch. Well okay, then, Mr. Smarty McSmartPants, which one are *you*, hm?”

“Um.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“No, I mean. Okay, well *I’m* a chipping sparrow,” says Peter, trying to describe the shape of his thoughts with hand gestures he knows are meaningless. “Small, anxious, nondescript non-entity who’s always hungry and never gets noticed. But Spider-Man is obviously not that. I haven’t figured out what I am when I’m Spider-Man.”

“Wait, you get to be two birds?”

“I have two lives.”

“So? I have two boxes! Why can’t you make one of them the seagull and I get to be a pterodactyl? I guess it’d have to be the white one, ‘cause, y’know, seagulls are white, not to be racist or anything. The yellow one’s probably some fucking bonkers, derpy-ass bird, like a flamingo or

some shit.”

Peter cocks his head. There’s merit to the flamingo idea — like many others, he’s seen Deadpool in drag before — but he doesn’t want to give Deadpool the satisfaction.

“Okay wait, so like, what about the Hulk?” says Deadpool. “That guy’s a legit Jekyll and Hyde. He’s gotta have two birds. Right? What’s he?”

“Bruce is a barn owl,” says Peter. “Owls aren’t nearly intelligent enough to do him justice, but once I got the image in my head I couldn’t shake it. Hulk is... Okay, don’t get mad, but Hulk isn’t a bird. He’s more of an African elephant bull with rabies. He’s not part of the system.”

For a minute it looks like Deadpool is going to argue, but in the end he just shrugs and says, “No, that’s fair.” He finishes his taco and with his mouth still full he says, “So do you have one for all of the Avengers?”

“Absolutely.”

“Let’s hear ‘em.”

“Really?”

“Duh, really.”

Peter grins and bounces a little and flaps the hand that’s not holding half a burrito. Deadpool is the only other person besides Gwen who has ever *asked* him to go on about a topic that they know damn well he won’t stop rambling about until compelled by outside forces. And after the first two times, Gwen would only ask when she was having insomnia, which was still okay but not as much fun.

And anyway she’s dead now, and Peter will never admit to anyone that for the first year or so, when he had insomnia, sometimes he would sneak out (as himself, not as Spider-Man) and sit in front of her gravestone and infodump about photography or birds or the nuances of Spidey-sense while he ran his fingertips across the grooves of her first name over and over and over. It never helped him sleep, and although it cleared information out of his brain, it also *filled* his brain with something much less soothing... And it didn’t feel like she was even halfway listening, and she didn’t need any help sleeping anymore, so he stopped.

Then about four years later, along came Deadpool. Who, once they’d figured out that they could just sit around together and be fine, didn’t seem to care who was talking as long as it was *someone*.

Peter takes a breath, then takes his turn:

“Okay, so, Tony? At first I thought he’d be one of those really crazy-looking birds of paradise with the flashy colors and the doofy mating dances, but when I looked into them it turns out they’re all pretty much brainless. So then I was gonna peg him as a crow, because the brains and personality are there, but he’s such a freaking showoff it just wouldn’t work in monochrome. There’s got to be some sparkle there, right? I mean it’s Tony freaking Stark. He’s a goddamn diva. Plus average people don’t get excited when they see crows so it had to be something that gets noticed, and that screams if it doesn’t. So then I thought, ‘Blue jay!’ They’re gaudy, they’re super loud and annoying, they’re smart, they’re identifiable by everyone over the age of five, they’re complete unrepentant *assholes*, and they’re *everywhere*, the way Tony is metaphorically everywhere with his tech and all that media coverage.”

A laugh rolls out of Deadpool and he lies back on the roof, hands behind head. “Wow, you’ve

spent how many hours thinking about this?”

“Too many. Pepper, she’s a swan. Not just because she’s pretty and graceful and all that, but because swans are really territorial, really aggressive birds you do *not* want to fuck around with. Wherever they are, they’re the boss and that’s that and everything will be fine as long as you stay the hell out of their way. Natasha is a red-breasted robin — and before you laugh, you should really watch the way a robin hunts. Super serious and to the point, fast, adaptable, opportunistic, fearless, and so focused it’s almost creepy. Also they tend to go unnoticed by most people, the way she can blend in anywhere. Plus, you know. Superficially. She wears all those dark colors but has the red hair. That’s not actually a reason, but it is a pretty cool coincidence.

“Sam got lucky — he actually is a falcon. A peregrine, because they’re the fastest and also the most badass, and their hunting pattern is basically identical to this thing I’ve seen him do a few times where he, like, just divebombs out of nowhere and manages to hit a guy on the ground without hitting the ground himself and I’m pretty sure that defies every law of physics but he does it anyway. Thor is pretty much an ostrich, because they’re huge and can kick your ass, they’re super fast, they have a temper, and they haven’t really evolved much since dinosaurs were around. Which — okay that sounds really mean, what I meant was that he’s super old and kind of eternal and stuff. Also because that’s another bird that pretty much everyone recognizes. Although I’m not 100% on the ostrich, because there’s something screwy about sticking a flightless bird with the only Avenger who can fly without super advanced technology, so don’t hold me to it, I might change my mind later. And Steve—“

“Bald eagle!” Deadpool sings.

“Actually, no.”

“Oh, c’mon, Spidey. Sometimes you just gotta go with the obvious answer.”

“Except when it’s obviously wrong,” says Peter. “Have you ever actually seen a bald eagle? In person? Up close? Have you ever had one *look at you*?”

“Mmmmaybe?”

“That’s a no, then. I went to this raptor sanctuary once when I was a teenager... Anyway, the point is, when an eagle looks at you, like, *right at you*, first of all you try not to crap yourself, and secondly you can, like, physically *feel* how ready it is to pull your intestines out through your belly button. It doesn’t even need to make up its mind about it; it’s already decided to do it, it just doesn’t feel like doing it yet. Steve’s not like that.”

“I dunno, man. Has he ever given you the Disapproving Face?”

Peter’s stomach goes icy for a second. “Yes. I know exactly the one you mean. But that’s still different. Disapproving is not the same as murderous, and eagles are murderous. Steve’s a goose.”

Deadpool barks a laugh (lending more credence to that border collie theory). “A *goose*? Now I know you’re just fuckin’ with me. How is Captain Steve fucking Rogers a goddamn *goose*?”

“Canada goose,” Peter says, and then he has to wait because Deadpool is laughing so hard he actually rolls onto his side and goes fetal. It takes a while, and Peter takes the opportunity to finish his burrito before it gets any colder.

“Done now?” asks Peter.

“Can’t... feel my... lungs,” Deadpool says, and hiccups.

“There aren’t many birds who can do the Disapproving Face, so that narrowed it down right away,” Peter says. “Canada geese are one of them. They’re also protective, adaptable, and really aggressive when they want to be. And they’re big-time team players. Seriously do not let me start talking about the social behaviors of geese because they are *amazing* and I want you to still like me after this conversation. And they also have a kind of... poise. You know? Like, sure, they are kind of doofy, the way Steve is kind of cheesy, but they carry it really, really well.”

“Okay but... *goose?*”

During the new round of laughter — wheezing and weak this time, punctuated by surprisingly accurate *uh-WHONK* goose noises — something occurs to Peter. Feeling rather sly, he says, “You know Ben Franklin wanted the national bird to be a turkey, right? You wouldn’t be laughing this hard if I was advocating a goose over a *turkey*.”

Deadpool stops breathing for a few seconds, like someone hit the pause button on his whole body. Presumably while he pictures a turkey wearing Captain America’s uniform and maybe with a spread of tail feathers bearing the same design as his shield.

And then it’s a very long time before he stops laughing again. Interspersed with little gasps of “Cranberry sauce!” and “Tail feathers!” and “Captain Steve Gobbles!” and “The little nose-wibble!” and “Oh god, I can’t, I can’t!”

Peter leans back on his hands, feeling smug to have reduced his friend to such a state. On purpose, no less. It’s a victory worth savoring.

Eventually, Deadpool recovers enough to sit up and eat his last taco. Lazily he throws the wrapper at Peter’s head, maybe in delayed retaliation for the ball of tin foil. “Oh, christ in the crisper drawer, I needed that,” says Deadpool. “Also: cannot un-see. So thank you very much, Spider-Man, you have fucked up my worldview for life. Turkey!Steve is now my forever headcanon.”

“I do live to corrupt the youth.”

“Aren’t you younger than me?”

“Maybe physically. And anyway I said he was a goose, not a turkey.”

Deadpool snrks at the reminder. “You know damn well what you did,” he says.

“I can’t imagine what you’re talking about.”

“You’re a shitty liar. Y’know you could stand to — wait. What about the other guy?”

“Hm?”

“Y’know: Katniss. The other pretty blonde, the other smartass. Is he a hawk and that’s just so obvious and boring you didn’t even think it was worth mentioning? Because it’s totally not like you to leave a list incomplete and that’s worrying, Spidey, very worrying. You’re seriously fucking with me tonight and on the one hand, bully for you, but on the other hand, shitty for me, so, for real, cut it out.”

Peter clears his throat. “Actually, I didn’t mention Clint because he’s so very much not-a-hawk,” he says. “I don’t really want people knowing, in case it gets back to him and taken out of context...”

“Well I know it can’t top Capturkey. Or Capgoose. Whatever. C’mon, baby boy, lay it on me. I

wanna collect the whole set!”

Peter hems.

“Pleeease? I bought you burritos!”

“You always buy me burritos.” He sighs. “Okay, but — seriously, don’t ever tell him I said this.”

“Who’s to tell?”

“I mean it. You need to keep your mouth shut about this.”

A beat.

“You know who you’re talkin’ to, right? Are you sure you wanna... I mean, like, reeeeeeally sure, ‘cause I’m not really known for... hey, wait a second, I’m supposed to be convincing you *to* tell me!”

“And aren’t you doing just a marvelous job at that.”

Deadpool growls. “Tell me, or no burritos for a week.”

“...You wouldn’t.”

“I so would.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Try me.” Deadpool pretends to examine his fingernails through his gloves.

Pause: Peter’s at least 90% sure that he’s bluffing, but he’s been 90% sure about certain other Deadpool-related things, and that remaining 10% is more than enough wiggle-room for some extremely unexpected shit to happen.

And as much as he’d strongly prefer *not* allowing Deadpool to catch on to just how terrified Peter is of the prospect of a week-long burrito embargo (would that also mean no hanging out, or just no food?), he can’t risk such a thing.

“Fine,” he says.

Deadpool grins and immediately rolls over onto his stomach, propping his chin in his hands. “So...?”

Peter rubs the back of his neck. “Clint’s a... *pjjn*,” he mumbles, barely audible even to himself.

“Say what?”

Louder: “A pigeon.”

And maybe there’s something even funnier about Clint “Pigeon-eye” Barton than Peter can perceive. Or maybe laughter is cumulative for Deadpool, and this is just the final straw after Capturkey. But either way, Peter doesn’t get a chance to explain *why* Hawkeye is a pigeon because Deadpool laughs so hard and so suddenly he falls off the roof.

From twelve stories.

The distant smack is conspicuously *not* followed by a comical “I’m okay.” Only a faint echoing clatter as some toppled trash cans resetttle.

Oops.

And Peter sighs through his nose, because he isn’t ready to patrol yet, and he isn’t ready to be done laughing until Tuesday. But, here he is.

...Damn, Spidey, you spoiled. It’s *Friday*. It’s the second burrito night in a row, and third one this week. Sometimes Deadpool gives him a bonus night on Saturdays, but he’s never come on a Friday before. It was a surprise, and as a rule Peter doesn’t like surprises, but this one he was more than fine with, not least because he still hasn’t been able to buy groceries. The point is, though, any company he’s had tonight was already *extra* by definition, and if someone gives you a free slice of cake you don’t have the right to complain about it being a bit small.

Especially if the cake falls off a roof. Seriously.

He gets up and squints down at the body in the alley, just a smear of red barely visible in the distant shadows. “At least he didn’t hit the fence,” he says to himself before rolling his mask back down. He starts away, then stops, and takes another look, indecisive. Some part of his brain hasn’t caught up yet, doesn’t want to leave yet, doesn’t realize that staying longer on the roof would *not* mean more company. Dead men tell no lies, and laugh at no jokes.

Peter wonders what it’s like to come back from the dead and be alone, when the last thing you remember was being not-alone.

But he knows it’ll be at least an hour before that happens, probably more, and it’s already well past his usual time to start patrol since the whole visit was unexpected. And Friday nights are busy nights. People will get hurt who can’t heal from it.

By the time he realized Deadpool was going over the roof it was already too late to catch the guy, but he still feels a certain sense of responsibility. It’s kind of Peter’s fault that he fell, after all.

But he knows Deadpool will be fine, and doesn’t actually need anything but some time. (Like Peter, when he shuts down.) And Spider-Man has responsibilities elsewhere.

But Deadpool.

But patrol.

Should he at least go down and cover Deadpool’s body so stray cats don’t eat it?

He’s still waffling when a cop car goes screaming down a nearby street, followed a moment later by two more. And then Peter remembers a Hunter S. Thompson quote: *A man who procrastinates in his choosing will inevitably have his choice made for him by circumstance.*

Spider-Man gives the strap of his webshooter one hard tug before turning away. “Eh, he’ll be okay.”

Sirens are not created equal. Fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars have different sound-sets, like bird calls. Everyone with undamaged hearing can tell the difference between a pigeon’s voice and a crow’s, and probably they could tell a squad car from an ambulance, too, if they paid a little more attention.

He hears an ambulance next, up ahead. Traffic is slow to inch out of its way so he soon swings over it and leaves it behind. It's definitely going the same way as the police cars. The same way Spidey-sense is telling him to go. The buzzing in his head cranks up like a dial, one click at a time, as he gets closer.

And okay now — this is *his* neighborhood. Seriously, his apartment is only about three blocks away, if that. And it's not a terrible area, so this kind of thing has never happened before. Not here. Not since he moved in, anyway. Should he be concerned about this?

Once is a coincidence, he reminds himself.

He's almost to the scene when he hears the rough bellow of a fire engine coming in from the left, ready to converge on the same path. That's not good at all. All three kinds of sirens means big business, and functionally speaking, that means one of two things:

One, the authorities will have this more than covered and Spider-Man will be forced to pace around the sidelines like a caged tiger, frustrated and helpless to lend a hand, or

Two, they'll really, *really* need him there, and it'll be a lot more dangerous than usual, and if he screws up the press will definitely make sure to yell about it tomorrow — and regardless of whether things go perfectly or horribly, it'll be stressful as fuck and he'll be a wreck for the next couple days at minimum. At least it's the weekend.

The windows on the building ahead of him are flashing with red and blue reflections. Spider-Man takes a breath so deep his lungs ache with the stretch, holds it, and whips around the corner.

The police have already cordoned off a low building and are crouched behind the open doors of their cruisers or pacing along the perimeter, keeping back the gathering crowd and stringing up more yellow tape. One of the cops is saying something into a megaphone but the words are fuzzy and incoherent. Spider-Man doesn't need to hear what he's saying. Hostage situation. They always say things from a script. And as far as he can tell, the only purpose of the script is to keep the hostage taker(s) distracted long enough for a SWAT team to sneak in and blow them away. In eight years as a crimefighter he's only seen a few hostage situations, but he's never seen anyone just surrender because of anything the megaphone or negotiator said. And before Spider-Man, the news never told the story that way, either.

Not that he trusts the media's word about anything.

Stuck to a corner out of the way, he watches, hidden, and considers whether he should talk to the police. He doesn't like talking to them, and they don't usually like talking to him. They're too busy now to bother trying to arrest him, so it would technically be possible to have a word with them, to get either a sitrep or a middle finger.

Regardless, he'd have to walk into the light to do it, and even if they're in the mood to accept his help, it probably wouldn't be to anyone's advantage if the people in the building know that Spider-Man's on the scene. He grins. "I'm a secret weeaaponnn," he sings.

He circles around the block to stay out of sight and lands on top of the building they've surrounded. Walks up to the ledge and into the light, in full view of cops and crowd but hidden from anyone inside, then waves at the cop with the megaphone.

The cop looks up, mutters something into the radio clipped to his shoulder.

Normally this would be where the cop either waves back or flips him off. Instead he just looks.

Spidey points to himself, then down at the door of the building, then raises both palms in a sort of offering gesture and tilts his head. (It'd be so much easier if he could count on more people to know some ASL.)

The cop glances at the door, then briefly holds up one finger, then talks into his shoulder-radio for a while. Spider-Man sits down and dangles his feet over the ledge, swings them back and forth and back and forth. The cops try not to stare, so as not to tip off the people inside, though the crowd behind the sawhorses and yellow tape are less subtle. But people point their fingers all over the place at scenes like this whether Spidey's here or not, so it shouldn't draw too much attention.

Finally the megaphone cop catches Spider-Man's eye and nods once.

Oh, goody! He's invited to the popular kids' party!

He stands up and stretches his arms languidly as he walks away from the light, toward the back of the building. There's no stairwell access on the roof and no convenient skylight so he'll have to use a window. The cops watching the back must've heard the news on their radio because they don't really do anything but nod at him or glare at him. He gives them the peace sign and snaps the hinges off a narrow top-floor window, then wriggles through.

A dark office, lots of paperwork, smelly low-pile carpet with holes in it, one extremely outdated computer with a yellowed monitor frame and a picture of a kitten on the mousepad. He opens the door onto an equally dark and gross hallway with a labeled supply closet and a bathroom (door closed, but he can smell it well enough to know what it is) and stairs leading down. He puts a hand on the railing and, trying very hard not to think about the piss-and-mildew smell coming from the bathroom, listens.

Two or three voices crying softly, one more moaning to itself in a distressed way that feels uncomfortably familiar to Peter, and one set of feet pacing in thick-soled boots that are maybe a little too big for the person wearing them.

The pacing: that would be the person responsible for this whole mess; hostages generally aren't allowed to walk around. That doesn't mean there's only one bad guy, though. There could be others, keeping still. And just because he can hear three or four hostages doesn't mean there aren't a whole lot more.

The faint draft coming up the stairs smells really, really strongly of sweat and body odor and general unwashed-ness. All male-body smells, too. Women smell different.

Spider-Man lets out a soft breath and wishes he'd taken the time to talk to the cops out back. He doesn't even know what this place *is*, much less the kinds of people would be here.

For a minute he considers going back out the way he came to ask his questions, then decides against it.

Hypocrite, hisses the back of his brain. *Just on Wednesday you told Bruce you'd always ask for help if other people were at risk...*

Yeah, he did say that, but he was talking about people wearing bombs, not stupid hostage situations. Besides, isn't a quick resolution important in things like this?

...Or is that kidnapping?

Excuses.

The decision is pure ego and he knows it — he's a superhero, and he can't imagine any of the Avengers going backwards for intel from *cops*. Not even Steve. They'd just slip in (or charge in) and deal with whatever they found. Yes, they all have a certain... neurological advantage that Peter doesn't enjoy, and are all quicker to assimilate and adapt to new information. But if Peter could survive into his mid-teens undiagnosed and (almost) passing as neurotypical, then *Spider-Man* can sure as hell handle going into one little hostage situation blind.

Also, if he did go back for more data, no one would ever let him live it down, least of all himself. Yes, his gigs are usually more mundane than the Avengers', or at least more straightforward, but he's been in this game nearly as long as a lot of them. He's had time to hone his specialties, his skills. Aunt May's always telling him to have more faith in himself.

(And, okay, usually she's talking about finding a better job or making more friends, but if she knew he was Spider-Man he's pretty sure she'd say the same thing about that, too.)

Man up, Peter Parker, he thinks.

And he *never* thinks sexist crap like that.

And that's when he realizes that he's fucking *terrified*.

He takes a breath and crawls up to the ceiling, then begins creeping down to the first floor, following the sounds of sniffles and footsteps. Dangerous situations don't scare him. *Unknown* situations scare him, especially if the one thing he *does* know is that they're dangerous. Especially if they're dangerous for others, not just himself.

Other people don't have superpowers. They can't compensate for Peter's fuckups the way Spider-Man can.

There's still time to go back and talk to the cops. He *wants* to go back and talk to the cops.

His body keeps moving.

Peter promises himself that, if he survives this, he can debate whether this counts as a failure of executive function.

He reaches the bottom of the stairs, and an empty foyer. A side table along one wall is covered with mussed stacks of pamphlets and bus schedules. There's a set of double-doors with light pouring from the little windows inset in the wood. Fluorescent light. Whoopee. Migraine in three, two, one...

Spider-Man lowers his head and squints through one of the windows upside-down. Whoa, that room is *huge*. Nearly the size of his high school gym. Narrow beds with grey or blue blankets and plain black footlockers line the walls and form rows up and down the room. Barracks style. Military, maybe?

There are a lot more than four hostages — twenty-nine that he can see, all men, sitting or crouching in the far corner, and they're sure as hell not *dressed* like military — but luck's on his side because it looks like there really is only one guy keeping them there.

Definitely not military, then. The bad guy doesn't look like much and no one out of boot camp would get pushed around by someone like that.

"What is it with bad guys and trench coats this week?" he mutters. "And why doesn't he have a gun? They always have guns in the movies. Is it in his pocket?"

A phone rings, very close — Spidey jerks back and squishes himself against the ceiling and out of sight, panting. Ears say the phone's mounted to the wall just next to the doors, in the big room. It rings (actually *rings*, and who has land-lines anymore?) eight times, and there's some strained shouting of "You! Answer it!" and "Because I fuckin' *said* so!" before a pair of sneakers slide-shuffles up to the doors. A shadow falls across one of the windows, and Spider-Man peeks through it. The hostage notices him, stiffens, and mumbles into the handset, eyes goggling. Peter puts a finger to his lips and the man nods to him and turns away. "It's for you," the hostage says toward the room.

Huh. The negotiator got here fast. That's a bit more movie-like. Okay. Familiar territory now. If Bruce Willis can do this, so can you.

Bruce Willis has stunt doubles, whispers his brain.

"Yeah, but *I* have superpowers," Peter whispers back.

Spider-Man pulls back until he hears the bad guy talking into the phone. Checking first to see that he's facing the other way, Spidey pushes very, very gently on one of the doors. Several of the hostages notice him but do their best not to react visibly. He crawls into the room and, sticking one of his feet to the door, eases it carefully shut behind him.

It's a cheap paneled ceiling — not his favorite. Panels like these are flimsy and he's had them give out on him before. He makes his way toward the group, placing fingers and toes carefully so his weight is distributed between at least two panels at all times, and avoids crossing over the fluorescent light fixtures so he doesn't cast any shadows. (Also because they're bright as *fuck* and their buzzing screws up his ability to focus on Spidey-sense, which is thrumming in anticipation and sending rhythmic little jolts of STAY ALERT down his spine.)

The bad guy's yelling into the phone now, getting angry, but translating sounds into words into meaning is a *process*, okay, and there's not enough room in Peter's brain right now to do both that and to concentrate on what he's actually doing, what he's going to do.

The man flails an arm as he shouts, miming out his rage for the benefit of someone who isn't here to see it. The motion whisks open his trench coat for a moment, and Spidey-sense vibrates his skull like the wrong-answer buzzer on a game show.

Another suicide-bomb vest thingy.

Well. That happened a lot sooner than he thought it would.

Also explains why the guy didn't see fit to bring a gun.

Macy's must be having a two-for-one special on explosive menswear this week.

He aims his wrist, and is trying to decide where to pin down the hand that isn't holding the phone, when a different idea occurs to him. He doesn't give it much consideration beyond *I can still web the shit out of him if it starts to backfire*, and before he knows it he's dropping softly, but not silently, to the floor behind the bomber.

The guy turns and drops the phone in one motion. "You—"

"Me," Spider-Man agrees. He waves. "Hi! Rough week? TGIF, right?"

The bomber uses both hands to rip open the trench coat and display his explosives like a dog showing off its teeth. The detonator is different from the last one... better. More wires, all the same

color. Less easy to figure out on sight. Also there's a blinking red LED somewhere near his shoulder and Spidey has literally no idea what it's for.

Defusing: not an option. New objective: get psycho away from people, preferably out of building.

"Yeah yeah," Spider-Man says, waving a hand in front of his face. "I know what you've got, so spare me the flasher routine." He looks at the phone on the floor. "Cops, man. Amirite? What'd they tell you? That they'd get you a helicopter and a suitcase full of nonsequential unmarked Benjis? A supermodel to pilot you to the Bahamas?"

"What the fuck are you on about?"

I have no fucking clue this was such a terrible idea fuck fuck FUCK! "I'm on about two milligrams of clonazepam a day. You? Your pupils are kinda... huge. Uppers, right? I can smell your flop sweat. Better watch that shit, guy, I hear it can shrivel up your balls. I don't mean to pry, I'm just concerned about your health. Have you discussed this with your doctor? You seem like you're under a lot of stress. I suck at talking but I'm pretty good at listening if you wanna get something off your... uh, chest." *Seriously, Parker, what the actual fuck?* "Okay that pun was totally on accident, though if you do want to get that big explodey thing off your literal chest I'd be more than happy to dispose of it for you so you and everyone else can maybe leave here alive."

"Motherfucker, I am *not* playing around. You gonna make a move here?" The man's hand hovers near the upsettingly not-simple detonator.

"No no, you're in charge. I get it. I just thought, you know. Um. Maybe we could talk about it? Just you and me and no one else? Cops are all high and mighty and, you know, armed. And the rest of these guys, I think they might be too stressed out right now to really hear your concerns, and people don't usually do... uh, this... unless they *have* concerns, so I thought..." *You thought what exactly, Parker? That you could empathize this situation away?*

"Get your scrawny ass over there with the others, hero," he says.

"Hey now. I have it on good authority that my ass is nowhere near as scrawny as the rest of me." Okay, now Spider-Man has literally no idea what he's talking about anymore. He was not aware his mouth had this powerful an autopilot. Maybe three Deadpools in a week is too many. "You got someone special in your life, bro? Maybe you should call them. Tell them you can't hang out this weekend 'cause you'll be in the Bahamas. They'll think you stood them up if you don't. Unless they're waiting for you there? Though I'm guessing that if you're here, doing this, maybe you're kind of alone in the world. It's alright, man, lots of us are in the same boat."

This time the guy bares his teeth literally. "Are you fucking insane or just stupid?"

He's not making any moves but Spidey-sense starts rattling Peter's skull like a gorilla rattling cage bars. "Uh..."

"I have regretted so much that regret has no more meaning," he says.

"That again?"

"I will burn the bridge behind me." And he reaches for the detonator.

Spider-Man yelps over the sound of his own brain screaming and fires webs at both the man's hands, knocking them wide. But there's nothing behind him for them to stick to, so after staggering, the bomber is still free and Peter's still trying to work out the significance of the "regret" line when the guy lunges for him.

They collide. Peter's skin cells try to leap backwards all at once and it *hurts* the way that touching almost always hurts, but an opportunity's an opportunity. He hooks an arm around the guy's waist in a very not-safe-not-intimate hug, smashing the detonator between their bodies where it can't be reached and hoping to god the pressure doesn't accidentally activate the thing. Spidey drags him toward the back door over the sounds of yelling and cheering and sobbing and screams of rage, every nerve in his body clenched like teeth. "*Shut up!*" he says, before slamming shoulder-first into the door and tumbling them both into the alley.

They lose their grip on each other and fall against a dumpster. Peter shakes his head to clear it, but the hostages' screaming encouragement still echoes, still has him feeling battered and black-eyed inside. He read an article once about blue whales' sonar getting fucked up from Navy submarines firing off sonic blasts and that is the only clear thought he's got and his brain clings to it with drowning desperation. He can't feel his feet.

The bomber recovers first. "Only half the place, but the mask too," he mumbles to himself. "Worth the cost. Regret... no more meaning. Better than nothing."

"Wha...? Is... what? Better than... What no *wait*—" Peter throws out a hand but is horrified to find himself diving backwards instead of attacking.

The man turns a knob and pushes a button and of course *that's* when Peter remembers that webs exist.

A noise so loud it only registers as *pain*.

Peter's skin *hates*. It hates everything, oh god. Where's his blanket? What's that *smell*? He can't do this. No more day. Go away.

Something's on his shoulder.

He tries to open his eyes but only one obeys. Black and orange and through the dirty lens of his Spider-Man mask. He really needs to clean this thing more often.

The heavy thing on his shoulder suddenly grips it, shakes him.

He jumps sideways and up and *away*. A hoarse, clipped noise, like a bark. From his own chest.

Staggers, leans against something big and inanimate. Something crunches underfoot.

A person, on one knee, with one hand hovering confused in the air, stares at him. "You okay, Spider-Man?"

Peter clutches angrily at the shoulder the person touched. His face hurts, his neck hurts, his shoulder hurts — these all feel burned — his other shoulder hurts because *you grabbed me you bastard* — he smells blood and seared meat (like lamb) and the plastic-fume odor that means his costume's been burned, but it's the uninjured shoulder that demands attention.

Don't touch me, he wants to say, but while the sentiment is crystalline, the words to express it are garble in his brain, and anyway he can't make his mouth open and all that happens with his throat is a choppy grunt. He could *kill* the person and their stupid *hand* with all the hatred-indignation-terror-rage-revulsion pooling in his stomach because *don't fucking touch me*.

Fire. There's fire. Very close, but not trying to spread. Footsteps, from... some direction, he can't

tell where. He looks around, but shapes don't make sense. The moving light, that's the fire, and fire kills you; but other than that it's as meaningless as the architecture in a nightmare.

Wait, that: That is a wall. It is part of a building, which is a big box you can go in and out of. It keeps the rain off. That is a building. On the other side of that wall are people (christ *no*, not more people).

On the wall itself, there are textures that do not belong, irregular breaks in the pattern that his brain labels *brick*. Something on the wall that is not brick. He stares, uncomprehending, knowing it's somehow important, these textures that don't belong. He memorizes them because he will need to *know*.

"Oh god oh god. We gotta get out of here, Spidey!" says the person.

Textures. Don't belong. Where do they belong? Not on the wall. Not anywhere. *Not outside*, whispers his brain.

Outside of what?

The person stands, reaches for him; his body reacts to the sight of a reaching hand, jumps up and sticks to the other wall, the wall that does *not* have Wrong Textures.

The person looks at him, says something else; Peter stares, frozen and uncomprehending and unblinking with the one eye that will open. The person waits a few more seconds and then goes away.

Other footsteps coming closer. And voices god fucking dammit voices fucking voices fuck. From... somewhere. Not from up the wall.

Up the wall is no-voices. Up the wall is safe.

Peter turns and climbs. The wind is cold, very cold, on the left side of his face, the left side of his neck, his left shoulder. He runs out of wall, reaches the top, and touches the cold side of his face as he runs. That is skin. But he's wearing his mask? The right side of his face still feels like mask. The left side feels like skin, and liquid, and cold. The inside of his ears feels fuzzy, like after that one time when he went to that nightclub just to see what it was like.

None of this makes sense.

Nothing makes sense.

Someone *touched* him and there were Wrong Textures that mean Bad Things and distantly he is aware of *everything hurts* and he runs, and he jumps, and his body swings him, and the wind is nice, he knows what that is. The wind is his friend. Distantly he thinks the word *place* which is somehow tied to the words *location* and *direction* which are completely meaningless.

Dark means something. So does *quiet*. He wants both.

A vague understanding that he has to *move* in order to achieve *place* where he can find those things he wants.

His throat makes a small noise and he just. Goes.

Away.

Fast.

Chapter End Notes

Wordy chapter is wordy. :/

At least it got interesting toward the end there? Hopefully? Yes?

I really don't know why I thought it'd be a good idea for Peter's most recent special interest to be birds instead of photography or chemistry. I know like two or three things about birds and the rest is just observation/pure fabrication. Hopefully Capturkey is worth it.

Next chapter: Eight deep-dish New York pizzas, with a side of internalized ableism. Also, a lot of gross stuff about eyeballs.

Eyes Down

Chapter Summary

In which any other person would've just gone to an ER on the other side of town, Deadpool almost always lives in squalor, and the author doesn't know shit about ASL or classic cartridge games.

Chapter warnings: more internalized ableism than usual, bodily damage including graphic eye injury, gore, vomit, Deadpool knocks gently on the fourth wall to see if the author's paying attention

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter's reasons for sitting at the edge of the roof this time have nothing to do with listening to the wind or watching the birds. It's still pragmatism, he thinks to himself, just... a different kind of pragmatism. A more conventional kind.

It's because the light is better at the edge, that's all. He can barely see what he's doing, and he really, *really needs* to see what he's doing.

"Exercise in futility," that's the phrase he's been trying to remember for the past twenty minutes.

Once he was alone, his brain remembered how to deal with the world, how to process visual input and piece together evidence to form understandings like *man set off bomb* and *got caught in blast* and *burns on face and left shoulder* and *half of mask destroyed, lens shattered, shards of lens stuck in face*.

His brain remembered how to make words, too, but those come back in bits and pieces. Idioms are usually either the first to return, or the last.

Exercise in futility. Skin of your teeth. Any landing you can walk away from.

He got four of the bigger lens-shards out of his face — they're glittering on the rooftop beside him. The blood is dry on them now, but it's still wet on his fingers. It's making them so slippery that the sticky spider-fingers are useless, and he doesn't have tweezers and he bites his nails, so without any grip he's not making much progress on any of the other, much smaller pieces stuck in the scorched skin around his left eye. If anything he's only pushing them in farther.

...To say nothing of *that one* shard, that one big piece that's actually *in* his left eye. It went through his eyelid and straight on in, sort of impaling the lid in place, which is why he couldn't open his eye earlier. He's pretty sure the lens only hit the white part of his eyeball and missed the parts that are important for vision, and if that's true he should still be able to see okay once this heals up, but with the eyelid still nailed shut he can't be sure yet.

He hasn't even tried to touch that fragment yet. And of course that one is the biggest problem, and the longer he leaves it, the more swollen his eye gets, and the less grip he'll be able to get once he does work up the nerve to try pulling it out.

All he has for a mirror is the reflective surface of the one remaining unbroken lens in his mask. The reflection is warped, dim, and tiny. And upside-down. Like trying to use a big spoon as a mirror. Not effective.

As if that weren't enough, his hands are starting to shake now, too. Peter's not sure if it's from the adrenaline die-off or if his body's trying to tell him that it's had enough and wants to nap now, please and thank you.

His body's rocking faintly back and forth with each heavy stroke of his heart. Bordering on palpitations now. It's throwing off his aim. He can't quite take a full breath.

Though, if there's one good thing about this possibly-blinded-in-one-eye, scorched-face-and-shoulder scenario, it's that at least it doesn't hurt too much. Especially considering the nature of the damage. Staggeringly significant pain tolerance: now that's one superpower he had before the spider bite.

But just because he's not feeling much in the way of pain doesn't mean his body isn't keenly aware of the damage it's taken. Hence the shakes.

He hears noise behind him, faint but coming closer, and his fingers stop their useless picking and poking for a moment until he understands, first, that it's singing, second, that it's Deadpool's voice, and third, what the words are. (Fourth, a moment of déjà vu.)

"I went into the fortune teller's, she wouldn't read my horoscope. I go into the laundromat, the people all buy extra soap. All in a day's... work..."

The voice goes flat at the last word, in a way that makes Peter think Deadpool lost the melody. Silence follows. No voice and no footsteps.

Peter pivots to face him, sees Deadpool mostly as a big scary-looking silhouette half-obscured by the girders of the water tower. "I can't get it out," Peter hears himself saying. And he quickly turns back toward the light to keep picking at his face with shivery fingers, because he hadn't planned on saying anything at all. Guess he's still deep enough in Spider-Man mode to run his mouth unchecked.

That, or he's going into shock.

"I'm really sorry I left you dead in the alley," Peter hears himself mutter as his too-big, too-blunt fingertips pick uselessly and relentlessly at his face, enraging the already unhappy skin and building up a sensory crescendo and he *knows* he's about to go into shutdown but he can't *stop*. "I didn't want to but I wasn't sure what I could even *do* for you and then I heard all three kinds of sirens and I *had* to go, and I knew you'd be okay anyway, but I'm still sorry. Also I didn't explain about Pigeon-Clint and I'm sorry about that too because I can't right now so it'll have to wait because I can't. I can't. I can't. I can't."

And he must be really preoccupied with this because he doesn't hear Deadpool come closer until he's kneeling down at Peter's left side, at the edge of his personal bubble and quivering as if *he* were the one with bits of his own exploded costume buried in his face. "Oh, baby boy," he says in the quietest voice Peter's ever heard from him. "What happened?"

Peter grins. (Not a real smile, more like an involuntary, smile-shaped grimace, like all the tension in his body found its way into certain muscles near his ears and decided to make itself known by trying to split his face apart along a vertical axis.) "I should've cut the green wire," he says.

“... You’re kidding, right? Another bomber? You tried to *defuse a bomb*? Are you nutsballs?”

Peter shakes his head. “I tried to defuse the guy the bomb was strapped to. I probably would’ve had better luck with the bomb itself. I really suck at people. I mean, heheh, I’ve had people *blow up* at me before, but this was... new.”

“Not cool, Spidey.”

“But on Thursday when I told you about the other bomber — and how I defused *his* bomb — you said it was awesome.”

“That one didn’t hurt you. You being hurt? Way less awesome.”

“Yeah yeah, I done fucked up. There go all my Cool Kid points.” Peter tries, again, to squeeze a shard out like popping a pimple. It still doesn’t work.

Deadpool looks from Peter’s ruined eye to the ruined mask and back again. “Dude, I thought you said those bugeyes were shatterproof.”

“They *were*,” Peter says. “Shatterproof scratch-resistant heat-resistant polycarbonate.”

“Someone lied to you. Tell you what, baby boy, you tell me who sold you this shit, and I’ll — uh, have *words* with ‘em, because this is obviously false advertising and to be honest, Spidey, they shouldn’t even be in business. And I’m really fucking good at putting assholes out of business. Don’t worry, man, I got your back. They won’t get away with this bullshit. Just gimme a name, seriously.”

“Um. Home Depot.”

Deadpool clicks his mouth. “Oi. Um. Yyyeah, they don’t usually test for ballistics or close-range incendiaries. What the hell are you doing sourcing your Spidey-swig from civilian manufacturers anyway? Why didn’t you get Stark to make you something? I mean I’m usually against blaming the victim and all, but I mean *come on*. This one’s kind of on you. But we’re not gonna let it happen again, ‘kay? I’m hookin’ you up with a supplier who actually knows shit about shit, when this is done.” Then he sits there with his hands twitching almost as bad as Peter’s, apparently not sure of the exact parameters that will determine “when this is done”.

Peter tries to look at Deadpool sideways but can’t, because if you move one eye then the other tries to move with it, and at least one of them is definitely not going anywhere. Instead he turns his whole head and lets his eye settle where it lands, at the base of Deadpool’s throat. He can see it pretty clearly when Deadpool swallows.

“Uh... I know this probably isn’t the first thing on your mind right now what with half your face bein’ exploded-on and all but... you know I can *see* your face, right?”

Peter smacks his ruined mask against the rooftop a few times. “Getting this thing off was bad enough,” he says. “I didn’t think it’d be worth the trouble of trying to put it back on.”

“You could’ve run. Or told me to fuck off. Or... something.”

Peter picks at a corner of his webshooter. “Didn’t want to.”

“Uhh... why? You... Dude, you... I don’t even. I got nothin’.”

“We’re friends,” says Peter. “Friends don’t sell each other’s secret identities, I know that much.

And if you do sell me out — well, the Avengers aren't really my friends, but they are inexplicably protective of me sometimes, and they'll all go after you at once. They would probably set up some kind of rotation where we all take turns killing you over and over. Tony would have JARVIS set up an algorithm for it, or a pie chart, or something. Maybe they'd run it like a chore wheel, except instead of vacuuming or dishes it'd be about who kills you that day, and how they do it."

"Colonel Mustard with the candlestick?"

"I'm saying don't fuck me over or every superhero in New York will fuck you up."

"I love it when you talk dirty."

Peter tries to take a deep, intentional breath the way Bruce showed him. His lungs are only half full when a shrieking pain in his back makes him stop. He goes back to the shallow breathing he's been doing, closes his eyes, and growls.

"I'm sorry. Okay, I... I actually didn't mean to threaten you," he says. "It's kind of a reflex. I'm kind of on edge, here."

"No kidding."

"So now I'm just asking. Nicely."

"Asking what? My hand in marriage?"

Peter growls again. "I'm asking you not to tell, show, or otherwise indicate to anyone what I look like. Ever. Please."

"Oh, well, if that's all. Sure, no problem, Spidey." Deadpool readjusts his legs and leans forward, tilting his head at the messy part of Peter's face. "Eh... Don't take this the wrong way, because I totally do hope that you can heal up from this just fine, but if you don't, then we'll totally be scarface twinsies and not gonna lie that'd be prettyfuckingsweet. For me anyway, not so much for you. 'Cause if the other half is anything to go by, you're preeetty, and it'd be a crime against nature to fuck that up. But you should, uh. You know that shit really needs to come out soon 'cause if you heal up over it then you'll have to cut it out and that sucks camel dick."

"I can't get it out." For some reason, saying it a second time is embarrassing. And he holds up his shaking, bloodslick hands in lieu of explaining why.

Deadpool rocks back and forth, murmuring to himself or to the boxes. "I dunno what you expect me to do about it, man," he says after a while. "I don't exactly carry first-aid shit around with me, and alas, the fates didn't see fit to bless me with a surgeon's hands. More like a skullbreaker's hands, which. Um. Why don't you just go home? You prob'ly got more first-aid shit than a school bus full of Boy Scouts, and. Y'know. A mirror and stuff."

"Uh..."

"Can you walk? You look like you can walk. Probably not a good idea to swing around right now, 'cause I mean, I imagine depth perception is kind of important for that, but. You could walk?"

"I could walk," Peter says.

Deadpool reads something in Peter's voice that Peter didn't know was there. "You don't wanna go home," he says.

Peter's quiet for a few seconds. "It happened close to my apartment," he says, fully aware that, between what he just said and the fact that his face is on display, he might as well have just handed Deadpool his address and a spare key. Now that he's done it, though, it doesn't bother him as much as he thought it might. He may have to move house anyway, after the explosion. The thought of apartment hunting makes him feel like he's going to vomit, unless that's just his body rebelling against its injuries some more. "I can't go anywhere near there right now," he says.

Deadpool leans back on his hands, head canted. "...The Tower?" he says.

"Hell no."

"It's the most logical," Deadpool says.

"It *would* be," says Peter, both appreciating and pitying Deadpool's feeble attempt to use Peter's own thinking style against him. "Except that they don't know my face and I don't want them to."

Deadpool's spine goes straight as rebar, presumably at the news that Peter now trusts him with something the freaking *Avengers* still don't know.

"And if I show up on my aunt's doorstep like this, first she'll have a heart attack and then she'll drag me to the ER. I'd rather live up here on the roof for the rest of my life than go to a hospital. Much less come up with a lie that'll explain all this."

"You can't stay here, Spidey."

"Sunrise is in an hour and a half," says Peter. "Once it's daylight I'll be able to see what I'm doing. Hey. Make you a deal. You can have my next pizza if you go get me a mirror and some tweezers."

"You *can't stay here*."

Peter blinks his good eye. "...I don't think you fully appreciate the offer I just made you. I'm asking you to stop in a Rite-Aid for two minutes and I'm offering you *half a month's pizza* in return. I know you like money more, but—"

"No."

Deadpool's starting to morph from loose, floppy, Fun Deadpool into serious, unreadable, Scary Deadpool — and Peter's not actually afraid of Scary Deadpool, because even Scary Deadpool doesn't set off the tingles, but *apparently* Peter's sacred pizza isn't *good* enough for him, and they're about to have an argument. And Peter does not have the energy for an argument, especially since he's already not-calm and that means he's already lost. (*Exercise in futility*, his brain happily repeats.)

"Look, I'll go to your stupid Rite-Aid and I'll get you your stupid med supplies," says Scary Deadpool, "but you're *not* giving away your pizza and you're *not* staying on this fucking roof, okay?!"

Peter's inflamed sense of pride falters in confusion. "Uh... I knew that we were arguing," he says, "but I think we were maybe having two different arguments? Explain please?"

Deadpool rolls his eyes so hard that he also rolls his entire upper body around in a half-arc, and groans the grandfather of all exasperated groans. "Can you *walk*," he says.

"Yes...?"

“Then get up. I got a place not too far from here. It’s a shithole but it’s safe. — Well I mean, it’s safer than a goddamn rooftop less than four blocks from an explosion that’s already all over the internet.”

Peter doesn’t move, and he must be making a face because Deadpool performs a smaller version of that same groan and stands up.

“We will walk there,” says Deadpool, punctuating the important verbs and nouns with really aggressive ASL. “You will wait there while I go on your little shopping trip. You will get yourself cleaned up and you will get some fucking *sleep* because seriously, baby boy, under all that blood you got circles under your eyes so black you look like you stole my mask. I’ll make sure nobody kills you in the meantime. And you’ll eat your own fucking pizza this month. No, actually, you know what? I’ll order *eight* pizzas and you’ll eat all of ‘em. Now, is all that clear or did I fuck up the translation?”

Peter lets out a small breath. “Clear,” he says. “Surprising, but clear.”

“You said we’re pals, didn’t you?” Deadpool’s body is angled away from him, hands balled up into fists at his sides. “Now get the fuck up.”

It smells of dust and closed windows and garbage that’s been left sitting for so long it’s become usable compost. Deadpool doesn’t give him a tour before heading out for medical kit and Peter thinks it’s probably because Deadpool doesn’t even remember where things are in here.

Peter wanders around opening doors. He’s surprised the lights turn on. Some of them, anyway.

There’s a two-seater couch with the legs ripped off, a TV, a microwave with the door dangling on a broken hinge, a dead cockroach floating in the amber-colored toilet water, a poster of Audrey Hepburn on one wall (wait, what?), and a naked mattress that Peter immediately wants to set on fire.

This doesn’t seem like a choice location for someone with open wounds. Or someone with a pulse. He’s pretty sure his injuries have already gone septic and he hasn’t even touched anything yet.

Peter’s brain begins two separate debates:

One, whether he should recategorize Deadpool from “seagull” to “dung beetle”, which would break the whole people-as-birds *system* but would make a better metaphor (and anyway, if anyone’s going to break the system, one way or another it’s bound to be Deadpool), and

Two, whether he should leave by the window they came in through, or take his chances with whatever horrors the hallway and stairwell have in store.

Neither debate reaches resolution before Deadpool comes back, through the door this time, with two full plastic bags that both seem way too large for the two things Peter actually asked for. He tosses one of the bags to Peter. “Put those on,” he says. “Gotta cover up your Spidey duds there.”

Peter opens the bag. There’s an extremely cheap grey hoodie and a pair of sweats inside.

He takes it into the bathroom and peels off the last vestiges of Spider-Man. The costume is salvageable; he folds it so most of the blood is trapped inside the folds of fabric and, for lack of anywhere else to put it, drops it into the Walgreens bag, along with the not-so-salvageable mask. And, after a few moments’ deliberation, the webshooters. Doesn’t seem likely he’ll need them

again tonight.

He rips the care tags out of the new clothes, unknots one end of the hoodie's drawstring and unthreads it, then drops these little castoffs on the pile of dusty garbage in one corner where, apparently, Deadpool saw no reason to place a proper trash bin. The hoodie's zipper is cold against his chest but nothing beats the feel of brand-new sweats.

Deadpool didn't get him any shoes, but Peter's feet are tougher than dog pads thanks to all the in-costume adventuring with super thin soles. As long as he doesn't step on used needles he'll be fine walking anywhere barefoot.

Because he's definitely not staying in this shit-pit, pizza promises be damned.

He splashes a bit of water on his face, but only a bit, because the water is the color of piss and it keeps choking and spluttering from air pockets in the pipes. Peter leaves the bathroom in somewhat of a hurry.

"So I'm not always so good at thinking ahead, right," Deadpool is saying as he pries up one of many loose floorboards and grabs a wad of cash from inside. "And the memory banks are scrambled pretty good when it comes to stuff that isn't so important like uh, living conditions and continuities and stuff. See, I knew I had this place and I knew it was the closest one but I kiiinda forgot how long it's been since I used it, and it wasn't until we actually got here that I remembered *why* I almost never use it. And I'm pretty sure that, y'know, health-wise, it's only one or two steps above the sewer, so what I'm thinkin' now is that we take a cab to one of the uh... slightly less-shitty places. Not gonna lie, Spidey, don't wanna get your hopes up or nothin' — they all suck, but they don't all suck as bad as this one, and I just. Uhh... Okay, which is more important to you right now between really good security and a fresh summer breeze?"

"I think..." It takes Peter a minute because Deadpool is swinging the other bag around in a circle now and it's really distracting. "Security," he says.

The swinging stops, thank god. "Okay good," says Deadpool. "'Cause saying the other place smells like a fresh summer breeze is sort of a little bit something of a tiny white *lying through my teeth*. Sssso yeah. Let's make like a tree. And before you go all Vulcan-logical on me and chew out the writer for writing himself into a corner and then backpedaling so hard we all get whiplash — stopping here first wasn't a complete waste of time. Where we're going, there ain't many 24-hour Walgreens around, know what I'm sayin'?"

"It's not a storage unit, is it?" says Peter as he follows Deadpool out the door. Somehow he's always imagined Deadpool breaking into other people's storage units and sleeping on their stacked-up cardboard boxes.

"Technically? No. I mean most of the neighbors live in warehouses and those are storage units, but this one used to be a factory. Very posh. I mean. Relatively."

"Neighbors?"

"Squatters, drunks, junkies, runaways, mercenaries with distorted perceptions of reality, people waitin' to die. Y'know. Usual suspects."

Peter pulls the hood as far over his face as it'll go, and nervously hugs the semi-transparent bag to his chest, hoping no one will see the costume inside. The smarter thing would be to pocket the webshooters and dump the rest. He doesn't *need* to repair the suit; he still has another one at home, but he feels better having a spare of everything. The mask is beyond repair, and far from the first

one to fall in the line of duty, but it never feels right to throw them away or leave them behind. He has a collection of them hidden in a fireproof safe in his closet. He might donate them all to a museum someday. Or go out to the middle of a desert and bury them in an unmarked grave. He hasn't decided yet.

Sharing a cab forces a necessary breach of Peter's usual personal-space bubble. Deadpool leans hard against the window on his side of the cab and keeps glancing at him in a very un-subtle way, but Peter's shared cabs before. Christ, he takes the *train* all the time. He knows to expect it and knows how to deal with it, even when his usual defenses are preoccupied by — for a totally random example — somewhat alarming injuries.

The nineteenth time Deadpool checks him for signs of meltdown (yes, Peter's been counting), Peter reaches across the backseat and flicks him in the forehead. "Chill out," says Peter. "You're going to give me a complex."

Deadpool claps a palm to his flicked forehead. "Owwww," he says, pointedly.

"Liar."

The driver stops before Deadpool tells her to. "End of the line, guy," she says.

"Uh, excuse you. We're still like a quarter-mile away."

"Tough."

"Can't you see my friend here is rather dramatically injured? On his *face*?"

The cabbie locks eyes with Deadpool's mask in the rearview. "He doesn't need his face to walk, now does he," she says. "End of the line. Cash or credit."

"Rude," Deadpool huffs, cramming a wad of bills through the little window in the plexiglass divider. "C'mon, Spiiii — III mean baby boy."

For no reason Peter can figure out, they stand in place and watch as the cab turns around and leaves.

"Aight, mouth shut and stay sharp," Deadpool says in a low voice. "Cabbie knows her shit. This isn't what you'd call a family-friendly neighborhood."

"I thought you said this was the secure one."

"Once we're inside, it will be. Until then, just keep an eye out. Heh. SeewhatIdidthere?"

"Hilarious."

Deadpool tilts a sharp brow at him. "Was that a whiff of sarcasm I just got off you?"

"That, or the wind off the Hudson."

"Baby boy *do* got jokes!"

"Peter," says Peter. "And didn't you just say to keep it down?"

"Yeah well I never said I wasn't a hypocriiii... wait, what?"

"Call me Peter. When it's not safe to call me... the other thing." Deadpool doesn't respond — or

move — or — is he *breathing*? — “It’s a little more dignified than ‘baby boy’, if you please,” says Peter.

“...Alias,” Deadpool says, mostly to himself, nodding.

“No,” says Peter, and Deadpool stops breathing again. “Well, why not?” says Peter. “You know my face and my neighborhood now. You were going to hunt down my name next anyway, and you’ll probably have everything from my social security number to my third-grade report card this time next week. You’re *Deadpool*. This way saves us both the trouble. ...Also I’m tired of ‘baby boy’ and don’t want to find out what other nicknames you would come up with when you can’t use the S-word.”

For another few nerve-fraying moments Deadpool remains nonresponsive and Peter wonders if he’s broken the man, and if so, how the hell Peter’s going to get them someplace safe, much less take care of his injuries, which are starting to hurt now that his last endorphin reserves are ebbing.

Then Deadpool snaps to attention and nods once. “Right!” he says. “Peter it is. But fair’s fair, baby boy. You have to call me Wade. Like, all the time.”

And — okay, pause: He could’ve sworn that Deadpool was one of those people who’d been so psychologically busted that their costumed identity subsumed their real one, negating the need to keep the real one secret. He’ll have to find a new Theory of Deadpool now.

The merc is waiting, arms crossed.

“Where are we going, Wade?”

The grin that answers him is almost bright enough, even through the panda-mask, to make up for the complete lack of streetlamps.

The walk is mostly a straight line toward the docks with a last-minute left turn that places them in front of what Peter supposes may have passed for a factory at some point in the distant past. There’s a huge padlock on the door that looks more like a prop than a security measure. Wade opens it with picks rather than a key. Peter refrains from comment.

The odor inside is easy to wrap his brain around because it simply smells like Wade. It’s a little weird to experience that smell coming from all around him instead of from a single point in space, but that’s the same adjustment Peter makes every time he enters someone else’s living space.

Wade hands Peter the second shopping bag — it feels heavier than it should — and points out the bathroom before busying himself with hastily scraping takeout containers and empty shotgun shells off the floor.

The mirror over the sink is filmy and fractured, but most of the pieces are still in the frame so it suffices. Peter looks... a lot worse than he expected. His left eye is swollen in fits and bursts, like those dough-bubbles on a really good pizza crust. And then there’s the dirt and shrapnel and char and sweat streaks and heavy bruising and blood both wet and dry and... he looks like a *Walking Dead* extra. Or a poor man’s Quasimodo. Or both. Zombiemode, bellringer of the undead.

The water from the sink runs clear (not yellow, thank god), but it doesn’t get warm. The cold shocks his exhausted system to full alert again. He grips the cracked edges of the sink and rides out a few heart palpitations.

Once washed, Peter’s happy to find that most of the char on his face and shoulder was just that — char. He’s a little burned, but nothing too severe for his accelerated healing. Probably it won’t scar.

The mask might've been blown wide open, but even if the "shatterproof" lenses *spectacularly* failed to do their job, the flame-retardant treatment in the fabric held up its end of the bargain. Good mask. Definitely one for the museum, not the unmarked mass grave in the desert.

He paws through the shopping bag and eventually finds a set of tweezers in the bottom — under boxes of gauze, rolls of tape, Ninja Turtle band-aids, alcohol, peroxide, ointment, a big bottle of contact-lens saline, four bags of Twizzlers, a John Grisham novel, a My Little Pony coloring book, sparkly turquoise nail polish, a small plush moose, condoms, and a tube of what appears to be some kind of treatment for yeast infections.

The tweezers are there, that's the important thing.

He takes them out of the packaging and immediately fumbles them to the floor. So much for sterility. He pops the seal on the alcohol and pours it over them before raising them to his face.

And here he runs into the real problem: his hands will not. Stop. Shaking.

He braces his dominant wrist with the other hand, presses the meat of his thumb against the bridge of his nose for stability, and for about a second and a half he lets himself think this is going to work. But just as the metal tips touch skin near the shard he's aiming for, his whole arm shudders, and the tweezers bap against the shard, shoving it below the surface of his skin before dropping into the sink.

"*Shit!*" Peter leans his forehead against the busted mirror and breathes out through his mouth. "Why the hell didn't you just web the guy and hand him to the bomb squad," he whispers. "It worked last time. You *both* might've had a chance that way. But no, you had to try *humaning* at him. Because that always goes *so* well."

There's a knock at the door. "Uh... Petey? You okay?"

"No," Peter calls back.

"Did you pull your eyeball out? Can you get it back in by yourself or do you need... something else? I've got, uh... tongs?"

"What? No. No tongs. My eyeball is still in but so is everything else."

"I got you tweezers."

"I know, I found them. But I can't..." He tries, but his mouth won't finish the sentence. Everything begins and ends with "can't".

This is *really* turning out to be a Bad Brain Day.

The silence on the other side of the door goes on so long that Peter would think Wade wandered off in search of tongs after all, except Peter can sort of *feel* him still there, listening and breathing and giving off body heat, and waiting.

The crimping and cramping starts in Peter's gut, because he knows what comes next, and he wishes he could skip forward in time to the part where it's already over and he can just quietly deal with the aftermath but not the event itself. The same thing he used to hope for every day on his way to school.

Yeah. Wishing didn't work back then, either.

He's not sure he has the willpower for this. But one accidental glance in the broken mirror as he picks the tweezers out of the sink cinches it: if he wants to avoid permanent damage, this has to be done *now*, and that means he has no choice.

Necessity is the mother of willpower.

Peter opens the door with a quick, unceremonious yank. Wade is, as expected, standing right on the threshold, though he startles as if he'd forgotten where he was.

Peter holds up a fist, palm down, and this time he doesn't try to hide the shaking in his hand.

"Can't get," he says — *god fucking dammit, Parker, are those seriously all the words you can force out? You've already been nonverbal once tonight. Are you really that fucked up by this? Really? You've taken worse damage, you've had people die on you before, you've been in explosions before, you've been poked by doctors plenty of times. This is what makes you nonverbal? What the fuck. What the actual flying fuck.*

Wade (he imagines) is looking him over and pulling out threads of fact from the fraying mess that is Peter, knotting them back together into something usable.

Peter has to imagine it, because he's about to vomit up his stomach, liver, heart, lungs, and spleen, he's about to vomit so hard his esophagus turns inside out, and he's pretty sure his ribcage is actually shrinking around all those organs — and therefore he can't raise his gaze any higher than Wade's knees.

His periphery catches the motion of Wade raising one palm and holding it under Peter's hovering fist. Peter drops the tweezers into it.

"You sure?" says Wade.

Peter shakes his head.

"...Do it anyway?"

Peter nods.

"Right for the jugular. Heh. I always did like your style, Spidey."

"*Style*," Peter echoes, hoping at least some of his seething derision comes through.

"Fuck yes, style," says Wade, rolling the tweezers across his knuckles. "Now siddown and shaddap. Smack me if you need to stop."

Peter kicks the toilet lid closed, unwilling to touch it with his hands, and sits down. Wade perches on the edge of the tub, close enough to knock knees but with his body twisted funny to keep that from happening. He raises both hands like he's surrendering, gives them a little jazz shake, then moves them toward Peter's face.

Peter closes his good eye and his whole body is clenched too tight to flinch when Wade's hands land on his face. Suddenly he doesn't feel like vomiting anymore; he feels *hollow*, just a cavern of a body ringing with the war-drum echoes of his enormous, frantic, blood-hungry heart.

"Don't hold your breath," mutters Wade.

It's not until the hands abruptly pull away and Wade says, louder, "Dude, for real, *breathe*," that Peter realizes the comment was literal and directed at him, not figurative and meant for the boxes.

Peter forces air down into the cavern he's become.

"Good boy," Wade says, and the hands are back on Peter's face with no warning this time, but the world is still prickling and tingling from the sudden return of oxygen so Peter doesn't register it except intellectually. "Don't keel over in here. Something tells me you wouldn't appreciate everything these tiles have to offer the face that lands on 'em."

Peter can hear the scrape of gloves on face, the wet rubbery stretch of the edges of his skin where there should be no edges at all, the click of tweezer-tips and the prickly feel of them pulling at him like a beetle crawling toward his ear —

Wade pulls back, making the exasperated noise *again*, and that's got to be giving him a sore throat by now. "*Petey!* Stop holding your fucking breath!"

Peter jumps and obeys, one hand automatically moving to pick at the webshooter he's not wearing. He plucks at the cuff of the hoodie instead and counts how many different types of mold he can see living in the grout of the floor-tile. (*I collect spores, molds, and fungus*, his brain says. Heh. Ghostbusters. Cool.)

"Would this be easier if I talked?" says Wade.

Peter tilts his head, considers; shrugs.

"I'mma try that then," Wade says, bringing his hands to bear again. "'Cause the last thing either of us needs is you passed out on my skank-ass bathroom floor. Not that it'd necessarily be a bad thing in the long run, 'cause if you were unconscious this would be a helluva lot easier, but you might end up with a staph infection or some shit, so, maybe that's not worth the trade-off. Also — and I recognize that this is probably the least appropriate time to say shit like this but since when do I let that stop me, and for real, since when do you let that stop *you*, either — but I kinda like watching you squirm. Even if your version of squirming is to grit your teeth and not move at all, so okay maybe 'squirm' is totally the wrong word but the *point* is I get to touch you right now and watch you react and even though I *really* wish the circumstances were different and, y'know, your reaction was different, it's still pretty cool in my book is all I'm sayin'. There's one."

Peter cracks open his right eye in time to see Wade drop a shining sliver of broken Spider-eye into the tub.

"That was the one that got wedged under the surface," Wade says. "I count nine more pieces besides the one trying to do you a Nick Fury. We'll save the big guy for last and in the meantime the rest should come out easier, how's that sound."

"Kay," Peter manages.

"Y'know, you're doing a lot better with this than you did last time I got my hands on you."

Peter scowls. "Not my *ass* this time," he points out.

"Shush, chatty monkey. If you talk your face moves around and I might miss and poke your eye out — HA! Omigod that was *totally* unintended, but I stand by it! Anyway, shaddap. I'm not completely brain-dead. I know your face is not your ass and I know I gave you, like, no warning last time and there were probably other factors too — huh? Oh, right, yeah this time it's medically necessary and groping you that other time was only medically necessary for *me*. This one is more mutually beneficial. You get a glass-free face and hopefully two functional eyeballs, and I get to not only see your purty face but I get to poke it around too, so this weird little scene we got goin'

on right here is totally symbiotic. And I mean like, Discovery Channel symbiotic, not like Venom and Carnage symbiotic...”

His voice stays fairly low, but constant. Between that and the subtle sounds of shrapnel dropping into the tub, it gives Peter more than enough distractions to focus on, and his breathing takes care of itself. He can feel how exhausted he is. Between that and Wade’s droning, he starts to relax (for some value of the word, anyway).

Wade stops to take a breath — which begs an alarming question, because this is the first time since he started talking that Peter’s heard him *inhale* — and cracks his knuckles. “Hokay! We are now in Final Jeopardy, Petey, and it’s time for the final answer. Players, are you ready? You’re gonna want to keep ‘em both closed for this one, Petey. Also I’m gonna have to touch your actual eye. I mean your eyelid. I’mma touch your eyelid. That’ll be the point of actual contact, it’ll be like a condom for your eyeball or something and holy fucking shitcrackers what am I even saying anymore, people don’t usually let me go on for this long — but, y’know. Fingers against eye. I won’t squish it or pop it out, scout’s honor.”

Peter wishes very strongly that he could inform Wade that this current line of babbletalk is *not helping*. He re-tenses and, as promised, feels two fingers rest lightly against his injured eye on either side of the embedded lens fragment. Hears the faint scrape of metal against it — *feels* the scrape vibrate down into his eye socket.

“And I know you’re all, like, superheroic-stoic about gettin’ hurt and that’s a good look and all, but this is gonna hurt like a motherfucker and you are gonna feel this one, so just — try not to *move* about it until I get all the pointy stuff away from your face, mmkay, sweetums? T-minus ten, nine —“

“OH MY HOLY HELL THE CHESTBURSTER FROM *ALIEN* JUST CAME OUT THROUGH MY SHITFUCKING *EYEBALL!*”

Wade clicks his tongue and calmly tosses both the tweezers and the extracted shard (it’s like two inches long, holy shit) into the tub. “Language,” he says.

Peter glares at him from the ceiling, one hand clamped hard over his left eye and blood patting gently down to the floor from between his fingers.

Wade looks quietly up at him for a little while before getting stiffly to his feet. “Wash it out with the contact-lens stuff,” he says. “As for the rest, eh, you prob’ly know way more about what you’re doing than me. Shower if you want. I’ll be in the living room, heralding the arrival of eight pizzas. What kinda toppings you like, anyway?”

“Every kind of pepper with sausage, also Hawaiian,” Peter answers on pure autopilot, because it’s such an easy, simple question, one he’s answered twice a month, every month, for his entire adult life and a good portion of his teens before that.

“Right then. Four of each?” And Wade closes the door before Peter can reply, or say thank you, or come down from the ceiling.

He has a weird feeling in his stomach and, no, it’s not just blowback from white-knuckling his way through an event he’s definitely going to have nightmares about. It has something to do with the way Wade’s acting... and right there Peter gives up wondering. Human behavior making him feel weird, without being able to pinpoint why? Well yes, hello Peter Parker, welcome to your own world.

Peter rinses out his eye as instructed, puts alcohol on the rest, and tapes so many gauze pads to his face that it forms its own kind of lopsided half-mask, bright white. He starts singing quietly to himself — doesn't realize until he reaches the chorus that he's singing "Music of the Night" from *Phantom of the Opera*.

The blood makes his eye burn and the puncture feels like it's pressing deeper into his skull, turning into an acute headache, but other than that, eh, not so bad. The fire damage to his shoulder and neck already feel more like sunburn.

Remembering that there's no hot water, he foregoes the shower. On impulse, he fishes the toy moose out of the bag and stuffs it into his hoodie pocket before grabbing the bag with his costume in.

He wanders back to the living room to find Wade on the far side of the couch, gloves gone and panda-mask rolled up to his nose, flipping channels with a distracted rhythm. A hive of video game consoles lurks in the shadows under the giant TV, like frightened cats hiding under a couch.

Peter passes the plastic bag from one hand to the other, uncertain. That whole thing about eight pizzas is something that most people would've meant as sarcasm or hyperbole or something, and Peter's also pretty sure most people would expect him to leave after the patch job.

But Wade is not "most people", and there's no precedent in their friendship for this kind of situation. The last thing Peter wants, ever, is to overstay his welcome — anywhere — even if he kind of wants to stay. Because that's usually when people start not-liking-him-anymore, because they're too "polite" to ask him to leave when they want him to, even if they *know* he can't figure out on his own when that is, and then they blame him for intruding or whatever. And then he feels like shit for intruding, even when he literally had no way of knowing.

"Um," he says, intelligently.

"Two thousand channels and still nothin' good is ever on," Wade says. "And if there is something worth watching, it's three minutes of show, fifteen minutes of commercials."

"That's why I pirate," says Peter.

Wade whips his head around. "You? Gasp! But that's *illegal*, Mr. Hero."

"Yeah?" Peter says, thinking it unnecessary to add the implied *What about it?* "And I'm too broke for Netflix. I'd steal the neighbors' internet too, but Tony and Bruce email me sometimes and I need to be able to beef up my own firewalls. Besides, I went to college. Proficiency in ripping off movies might as well be a graduation requirement."

"College. Fancy-pants." Wade looks back at the screen, flips a few more channels. "What'd you study, besides copyright infringement?"

"Bio and communications."

"Oo, double major. Smart guy, eh?"

"Yeah, so smart I didn't finish."

"...Oh. Why not?"

Long story, Peter signs.

Wade's staring fixedly at the TV, but catches the message anyway and nods. "Some other time maybe. Oh hey lookit, one of *The Mummy* sequels! Please say yes. You're even dressed up for it."

"Nnn. Yes, I'm probably concussed enough to find Brendan Fraser entertaining."

Wade thumps the couch cushion beside him, then gestures to the full spread of seating options, which include the rest of the couch, a duct-taped armchair, and the floor.

With a sigh of relief that Peter didn't know was building up inside him, he takes the opposite end of the couch and pulls his feet up under his knees. The couch fabric is unevenly worn and smells of equal parts food, blood, and Wade's body. It's not exactly pleasant, but Peter's distaste is mild, petty. He thinks he'd probably like the couch, if given cause and opportunity to get familiar with it.

The movie is still showing the opening credits when Peter's fatigue catches up to him. And this time there's no pain or cold water to shock his system.

He wakes up, wedged tightly in the corner between the seatback and armrest, when Wade is arguing loudly with the delivery guy on the phone about how it's *totally* safe to deliver to this address, or at least it's safer than the consequences of *not* delivering. Which Wade then begins to describe in graphic detail.

He wakes up, flopped over sideways with his head on the middle cushion, when Wade drops *eight fucking pizza boxes* on the tipped-over refrigerator that serves as his coffee table. Peter sits up for that. "I have never seen that much pizza at once in my entire life," he intones. Wade says something in reply, but Peter can't hear the words; he's too busy trying not to weep when he pops the first box top and sees not just sausage-and-every-kind-of-pepper but on a *deep dish* crust. He snarfs four slices of that and two slices of the Hawaiian (also deep dish) before the food coma sets in.

He wakes up, sprawled across the entire length of the couch with his side pressed firmly into the seatback and a coarse, olive-drab blanket over him. This time there's that inexplicable sense of a lot more time having passed. He blinks around through one foggy eye to find that it's still nighttime — or possibly nighttime *again* — and Wade is sitting on the floor, leaning against the couch with the back of his head not twelve inches from Peter's face, button-mashing an SNES controller.

The unexpected proximity does not immediately alarm Peter.

And *that* immediately alarms Peter.

He sits up and regrets it at once because the headache comes crashing in like the great wave off Kanagawa and his ribs are screaming and he's pretty sure his eyeball would drop right out of his head if it weren't still taped in place.

"Easy there cowboy," Wade says, still smashing the buttons. "It always hurts worse the next day. I used to have a bunch of oxy and shit lyin' around — don't ask me why, Petey, it's a long depressing story, okay? — but I can't find it anymore, so you're gonna hafta—"

"The next day?" Peter says. "It's tomorrow?"

"No, it's today. Last time you were awake it was yesterday. Yeah, you uh, kinda passed out pretty good there."

"I missed work..."

"You work on Saturdays? 'Cause that's what today was."

“Oh. Never mind, I guess?”

“Eat some food. Food is good. I know I can pack away a ton when I’ve been healing, and I heard Cap’s the same way so I’m guessin’ you are too. I only had like nine slices so there’s still five or six whole pizzas left and the fridge is broke so you should really get on that before the cheese starts growing fur.”

“I’m... not sure that I—“

“I told you before we got here that you were gonna eat all the pizzas. It was part of our *deal*, aight? And okay maybe I helped eat some without asking. *And I guess I’m sorry and stuff*. But you’re not leaving here until all that food is worming its way through someone’s intestines, and I vote yours, ‘cause, y’know, you’re scrawny and broke and you’re the one who got blown up and all.” Wade turns and looks at him, pointedly.

Blown up.

A mental image, of a certain texture splattered against a wall, glistening far too bright in firelight and dripping slowly down. The crunch of a bone fragment under Peter’s foot.

The things we can’t react to in the moment, either due to circumstance or denial... we still need to react to them eventually. Something Bruce said once.

Peter’s reacting now. He’s reacting to a man who he was still *talking to* when that man turned loudly and violently inside-out.

He extricates himself from the couch with only a slight wobble, and is proud to reach the toilet before vomiting. Luckily his stomach made good work of the pizza so there’s nothing of jalapeño or tomato sauce to the taste of it, just that empty sour vinegar of stomach acid. Not that it’s a great improvement. The back of his throat feels like it’s been scoured with superheated steel wool.

When he goes to stick his mouth under the tap, he can’t, because the sink is stopped up and his costume is soaking in it, and he *knows* he didn’t do that himself. The water’s brownish-pink.

He has just enough time to silently acknowledge the weird sweetness of Wade’s gesture before he doubles over the toilet for round two.

There’s no mouthwash, which doesn’t surprise him. He stumbles to the kitchen and roots around until, miracle of miracles, he finds a box of baking soda, and scrubs his mouth out with that. Uncle Ben used to talk about how his own parents used baking soda back in the day when they couldn’t spare the change for toothpaste.

It’s salty as hell and leaves his mouth gritty and tingly, but oddly soothed.

Peter angles his head under the kitchen tap and spends a long time drinking. And he knows it’s only rust from the pipes but it still *tastes* like blood.

When he returns to the living room, woozy, Wade has his game on pause (Peter’s awake enough now to see he’s been playing Mario Kart) and is staring at him from the floor. His costume and panda-mask are gone — have been gone since Peter woke up; he’s only processing it now — replaced by a white T-shirt and PJ bottoms with Stewie Griffin on them. No Deadpool gear at all, now *that’s* new, so Peter stares back. Takes a moment to register *bald* and *chin-texture actually everywhere* and *left ear slightly lower than right* as additional details in the *Wade/Deadpool* column of his *How to Recognize People You Know* mental directory, before reclaiming his place on the couch.

Wade's still watching him, just as unreadable as any ordinary person, and that's more than a little irritating.

"What?" Peter says.

"You okay there, tiger?"

"No. But I will be. Later."

Wade finally makes a face Peter can understand: dubiousness.

"Play your game, Wade," Peter says, and reaches over to open the pizza box currently on top of the stack although he has no intention of eating for at least another hour, or however long it takes for his stomach to forget the things it needs to forget.

But Wade watches him fail to touch the actual food, and makes a new face. "Not for the faint of heart or weak of stomach, right," says Wade, turning his attention back to the TV screen, which is still on pause.

"What, Mario Kart?"

Wade snorts. "Sorry, I'm — sorry. I know this ain't something great to wake up to and I was gonna maybe bug off before you woke up, but I didn't know when that would be, and I'm on the final level so I didn't wanna stop to go grab my mask and anyway you know how shitty it feels to wear that kinda crap too long when it gets all sweaty and stuff and also I didn't wanna leave you alone for too long because..."

Peter rubs his good eye. "Wade, I legitimately have no idea what you're talking about."

"I mean I kind of expected it, since usually people respond by running screaming into the night or maybe takin' a shot or, y'know, puking their guts out, but you get extra credit because you puked with more grace than most. Hell, you even made it to the bathroom in time! Usually I end up personally puked on, so for serious, mad props." Wade shoves an aggressive thumbs-up toward Peter without looking. "Good job."

Peter makes a noise low in his throat. His head is way too swimmy to decipher Wade Wilson. "I'm still not sure what you're talking about," he says, "but if you're asking why I puked, it's because you mentioned the suicide bomber and that made me remember... stuff. That I'd forgotten. While I was asleep."

Wade's mouth quirks downward.

"And don't start thinking I'm a wuss about this kind of thing, either, because I've seen bodies before and picked them up and moved them around, and they're about as scary to me as lollipops, just usually they. Usually they *look* like bodies. This guy didn't even have the integrity a Mack truck leaves for roadkill. It was — he was — it was just *tissue* and, and fluids, and there were intestines up high and skull fragments down low and there was hair on the wall and still little bits of skin attached to it, and there was one bit where you could tell he had a tattoo of something but I couldn't tell what it was a tattoo *of* and." Peter swallows four times. "I'm going to stop talking now or I'm going to vomit again."

After a moment, Wade reaches up and slowly, firmly closes the lid of the pizza box. He gives Peter a weird side-eye, then unpauses his game and finishes it out in silence. (For some value of the word. Now Peter's awake, Wade keeps a running dialogue with the various elements of the game, cussing out Bowser, narrating for Luigi in a voice so nasal it'd make Fran Drescher do a double-

take.)

When he ends up at the starting screen again, he dangles a second controller by the cord, holding it out in Peter's direction like a cat toy. "Petey, Spider-Man, baby boy," he says, batting his eyes, "will you be my player two?"

"No," says Peter. "I'll be your player one."

"My house, my rules."

Peter rubs his mouth. "Compromise?"

"Whatcha got in mind?"

"I'll be P2 but I get to pick the game."

Wade agrees but there's still a fair deal of bickering and bargaining and an inexplicable tangent about the merits of skinny jeans before they finally settle on Sonic the Hedgehog, which Peter's already regretting even while Wade is still digging through the cords to switch consoles because playing as Tails *sucks* and he should've thought of that.

His stomach has calmed down enough that he's starting to feel hungry again and he traces his fingernails over the edge of the pizza box, still unwilling to open it and face the way mozzarella looks when it's gone room temperature, because it looks like brain matter. Just the right amount of glisten and everything. He picks away tiny shreds of cardboard and watches them twirl down to the floor. *It'll be autumn soon*, he thinks.

There's a pause in the steady stream of profanity coming from over by the TV. Wade's on his knees, cords looped around his legs, watching him.

"You gonna be okay?" Wade asks.

Peter fidgets the cuff of his sleeve. "For some value of the word," he says.

"You need something?"

"Yeah. I need to know when you're kicking me out. I still can't go home and need to have a plan ready."

"*'Kick me out'*, he says," Wade scoffs under his breath. He gives up with the cords and just grabs the Sega and yanks. The cords are still knotted so it doesn't get very far, and he swears under his breath, in Spanish this time. "Actually I'm giving serious thought to tying you up and throwing you in the closet," he says.

Peter knows better than to brush that off as pure joke. "Please don't make me fight you."

"I won't," says Wade. "Not before you're better, anyway. I will, however, kick your *ass* at this game if I can ever get the fuckin' piece of shit set up."

Peter doesn't point out that it's not a versus game. Somehow, Wade will manage to turn it into one. "So how long can I stay without becoming a hostage?"

Wade finally locates the end of the power cord and starts threading it backwards through the knot, his spine bent double in concentration. "Stay as long as you need to," he says without looking up. "Or as long as you want to. Whichever one's longer."

Chapter End Notes

Oh, right. Yeah, that's a thing about my writing — my chapter length fluctuates wildly. Look out for that. Next one's even longer! With more than two characters!

Next chapter: The Avengers are concern trolls.

Hospital Food

Chapter Summary

In which the obligatory pancakes happen, the Avengers are concern trolls, and the author doesn't know shit about Iron Man except for what's in the MCU.

Chapter warnings: General ableist nonsense and hypocrisy, trust issues, mild spoilers for the HG Wells novel "Invisible Man", cliffhanger

Chapter Notes

Ok seriously y'all? All you lovely, life-giving folks with your lovely, life-giving comments? I LOVE YOU. On the one hand, writing these dorks is its own reward, and is a thing that happens just quietly, just very privately, in the very small space between my brain and my laptop. But when y'all reach out with the kudos and the subscriptions and the COMMENTS (omg the comments), THAT is when it becomes so worthwhile. I just hope most of you will be happy with the direction this story takes. <3

Also: **HAPPY DEADPOOL DAY!!** Who's seeing the movie? I'm not sure I'll be able to make it today — I came down with a sudden fever yesterday, and while I'm feeling a bit better today, I dunno if I'll be able to do the whole movie theater *thing*. In the meantime: a chapter for YOU.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The shitty thing about eye injuries — besides possibly ending up half blind and lacking depth perception in the meantime — is your tear ducts kicking into overdrive. Peter wakes up slow and muzzy, dimly notes that the sunlight in the window has a shiny midmorning quality, then after a moment or two of blissful *blankness*... his nerve endings wake up and there's a *soaking wet* wad of gauze on his FACE.

He makes a loud noise (halfway between a dog's bark and a monkey's scream) and claws at the bandages, bucking around on the couch like he could somehow dodge the thing that's already stuck to him with tape. Wade wakes up and is on his feet and has his gun drawn right about the same time Peter falls onto the floor and throws the scratchy, squelchy, blood- and tear-soaked bandages across the room. Wade squeezes off two shots into the gauze, and into the floor beneath them.

The noise of the gun paralyzes Peter in place, silent inside except for the ringing in his ears.

The noise also wakes Wade up all the way, and for about thirty seconds they both piece their brains back together and backtrack to figure out what the actual fuck just happened.

Then, right around the same time, both start to laugh. The sounds are distant and muffled in Peter's ears. The hearing damage should heal itself within an hour.

Tossing the gun onto the fridge-cum-coffee-table, Wade scratches his balls and then signs, *Clean your eye.*

Take a Xanax, Peter signs back.

Sassy little shit.

Peter folds his arms and huffs.

It's a compliment, Wade says.

Peter rubs the back of his neck. *Thanks?*

Eye, Wade says, with force.

In the bathroom, Peter pries his fat eyelid open with his fingers even though he knows he probably shouldn't. It stings like a bitch and sends a flash flood of tears and blood rushing down his face (makes his nose run, too), but he holds it open anyway until the fog resolves into a blurry rendition of the bathroom.

Not blinded! It's turning out to be a good day.

(When did his standards of well-being become so... rudimentary?)

He touches each of the other small wounds on his face, one by one. They're all closed up now, if a bit tender, a few scabs still clinging and ready to crumble. He brushes those away. His back feels a little better too.

The burns are still sorting themselves out; the ones closer to his eye seem to have made almost no progress. He probably has infection to thank for that; all this swelling is far from normal for an injury at least thirty-six hours old. It's red and grouchy and throbbing with what would be pain if he let himself pay attention to it. Also, it's still leaking fluids of unpleasant description.

Figuring there's no point in sticking more gauze on yet when it'll just get soaked through in a minute or so, Peter squirts the eye with more saline, dries it best he can with wads of toilet paper, takes a piss, and then waits around tugging on his fingers until the metallic, banging-clanging, kitchen-type sounds on the other side of the door quiet down. (He's a bit surprised Wade owns any cookware at all — the man loves his food, sure, but Peter didn't figure him the type to bother making any for himself, ever.)

When Peter emerges, the kitchen-sounds have dwindled down to a hissing pan and the soft scrape of a rubber spatula against a bowl. It smells... pretty good actually. Kind of sugary.

Wade's wearing his panda-mask again, and an apron, but Peter couldn't tell you what color the apron originally was. It's nothing but stains and string.

"I realized that maybe expecting you to eat five large pizzas in the limited time they have left for this world is probably unrealistic," Wade says. "I should really get the fridge fixed or get a new one again but honestly? I put shit in there and forget it's there. What's the point of dropping a few yards on something to keep food from going bad if you forget about it and it goes bad anyway? Let it never be said that I don't learn my lesson. Y'know. Sometimes. About some things. Now if they make a fridge with a see-through door I might give that a whirl, 'cause like, if you see it you remember it — except actually maybe not? 'Cause the crisper drawer is already see-through and *everyone* forgets shit in there. You like pancakes? 'Course you do. Everyone likes pancakes. I got real maple, too, none of your shitty Hungry Jack bullshit. See? Glass bottle and everything. I told

you I was Canadian. Grab a plate, Petey, they're around here somewhere. Don't ask me where, I don't even fuckin' know. Just root around." And he starts singing Missy Elliot.

It takes a little while but Peter eventually finds an unbroken plate sitting vertically in the narrow gap between the microwave and the wall. He washes it *thoroughly* and before he can find something to dry it with, Wade starts slapping pancakes down on it.

Peter eats fast, but each time the plate's almost clear Wade comes over and drops another one on. The first ones were round, but then one comes out looking like Mickey Mouse; the next is, maybe, a dog; then a comic-book speech balloon; after that, they're all shaped like dicks.

They all taste good, though.

"Peencakes," snickers Peter.

"Next time I'll throw in some pooncakes, too," says Wade. "Equal pay for equal work!"

He wanders over, his own plate stacked high with dick-shaped starch. "So uh, I didn't wanna say anything while you were eating, but it looks like you kinda got infected there."

"Yes, I noticed," says Peter. "Sorry if it's gross for you. I didn't want to cover it up if the bandages were going to just get wet again. That felt like shit."

Wade laughs, a little louder and sharper than usual. "You gross *me* out? Oh, baby boy, bless your little bloodpump, that's just precious."

Peter scowls. "Could you not infantilize me, please?"

"Now I dunno how your healing factor stacks up against mine, seeing as I never really got to see any of your skin most of the time so I couldn't keep tabs on your bumps 'n' scrapes to find out how fast they patch up, but that—" He waggles his fork vaguely toward Peter's eye. "That looks *worse* than it did before, which is the opposite of healing. And I don't exactly keep antibiotics around. Not much use for 'em, y'know? If you want I could go swipe some—"

"No," says Peter.

"Yeah, figured you'd say that." Wade scratches the back of his head, tilts his whole body a little bit sideways. "You have no idea how much it pains me to say this, Spidey, but you gotta get the hell out of here, like, today. Like, right after breakfast. Or — well, you already ate, so maybe you go now."

Suddenly Peter gets the feeling he ate too much. "You said you'd warn me before kicking me out," he says.

"No, I said I wanted you to stay as long as spiderly possible. But bad shit's gonna happen if you don't get that thing taken care of, pronto. Can't do that here."

Peter looks down at the plate, syrup already hardening around the edges. "Where do you suggest?" he says, mood darkening because he already knows what his options are, and none of them are good. But maybe Wade's thought of a new alternative? Stranger things have happened.

"Someplace that's actually equipped to treat injuries," Wade says, "not just a one-man flophouse where all you can do is lay down and wait for shit to fix itself. Which, correct me if I'm wrong, 'cause I don't know but I can guess, but doesn't that basically describe your place as much as mine? You're not down with the hospital and I don't blame you. You need someplace where they

won't ask questions or rat you out to the po-po. That there's the kind of injury that attracts attention. I mean it's nothing compared to if you walked in carrying a severed arm and full up with bullets and shuriken and a tanto blade stickin' out your kidney for good measure — true story, by the way — and you could probably get away with a got-drunk-and-fell-through-a-window-onto-a-lit-barbecue-grill story... But bombs get media attention, and you go *anywhere* public lookin' like that, people are gonna start sharpening their pitchforks. So yeah. The pickin's lookin' pretty slim there, cowboy."

Peter rubs the back of his neck, then creeps his fingers up and yanks on his hair. "Please tell me you know someplace other than *there*," he says.

"Not in this country, no. Or at least, not anyplace I'd trust with my own rockin' bod, much less yours."

Peter makes an unhappy noise.

"Aw, c'mon, don't whimper like some stray puppy I picked up off the street and then kicked right back out again after Christmas. Your eyeball's gonna fall out of your damn head at this rate and nobody wants that. If you wanna stay here a while longer or you wanna go home instead I can still find you some meds—"

"No. No stealing from hospitals."

"Who said I was gonna—"

"Weren't you?"

"...Maybe."

Peter drops his head into his hands. "Shit." He kicks the floor, then kicks it again, and keeps going until his whole foot is buzzing. "Fuck!"

Wade hums around a massive mouthful of pancakes. "Y'know," he says, spraying crumbs, "dere'sh vorshe plashesh den da 'Vengersh." He swallows. "I mean if I was on their good side I'd be showin' up there every chance I got. And you know they got the goods, you know they got their own resident medic in Doctor Bruce Barn Owl —"

"He's not that kind of doctor."

"— and you know they know how to keep their mouths shut if you're worried about that purty face of yours gettin' plastered all over Reddit. If you ask me, being able to just *go* there without getting shot at, and knowing they'll give you whatever you need? That's not somethin' to kick and cuss about, that's like... suspiciously convenient. Your own personal *deus ex machina*. Like, I'd think the author was being lazy if it weren't canon. You hear what I'm sayin', Petey?"

"Yes," says Peter, clenching his fists so tight that his nails would draw blood if he didn't keep them bitten so short. "I hear what you're saying and if anything it's basically what *they* say. 'Come see us anytime, Spidey. *We'll* help you out.'"

"So what's the problem?"

"It's condescending as fuck, that's the problem."

Wade tilts his head. "...Nope, I still don't get it."

“Does it ever occur to anyone that maybe *I* could help *them*?”

“What, you mean like if Tin Man’s face explodes you wanna be the one picking out the pieces? It’ll never happen.”

“Exactly. ‘It’ll never happen.’ I mean, what the hell. I’m perfectly capable—”

Wade laughs.

“What’s funny,” Peter growls.

“You hero types,” Wade says. “C’mon, Petey, even I know that it doesn’t occur to them very often that they could use help from each other, much less from your friendly neighborhood twink. Seriously, you might as well be an Avenger already. You got the exact same attitude. Me, I’m all lone-wolf-being-lone, I’m all Clint Eastwood right down to the gun kink, but even when I do need a hand, people ain’t exactly lining up to give it. I mean I *get* what I need, I just gotta threaten people for it. You? All you gotta do is bat your eyes and ask.” He studies his fork with peculiar intensity for a moment. “Not that I got any right to bitch. After I run into people they usually owe me payback, not favors. No one to blame but me! You, on the other hand.”

“Me, what?”

“You do good. Even if the Big Damn Heroes are too busy being holier-than-thou to think about sending you the club invitation you so obviously deserve, you do *good shit*. And for that, they *owe* you. Basic medical support if nothing else. Okay, so you’re not on the same team, but you’re still on the same team, see?”

“Uh...”

“Look. It’s really simple math, Spidey. It’s not about who’s better or more independent or whatever the fuck your weight-of-the-world complex is tellin’ you. They have resources. You need resources. They’re willing to give you those resources. Easy.”

“If my relationship with the Avengers were that simple,” says Peter, “they wouldn’t be always treating me like a kid that got lost on the subway.”

Wade slams his forehead against the counter. “Just go. Okay? You’re leaking pus and I can’t fix it.”

“Nngg.”

“I can’t *fix* it, Petey.”

“Who’s asking you to?”

Wade looks up, slowly... dangerously (or would be, if Spidey-sense didn’t say otherwise). “Go,” he says, “or I’ll drag you there myself.”

“I’m stronger than you.”

“I’ll shoot you in the leg.”

“I believe you,” Peter says, and he does. “They’re bastards, though.”

“So?”

“They’re not my friends.”

“That’s not the—“ Wade cuts himself off, looks distant and puzzled for a minute, but he must really be fixated on winning this argument because he pulls back from whatever twisty detour the boxes are trying to take him down. “I’ll visit,” he says after a while. “If you go now, I’ll visit later.”

Peter raises one eyebrow (an expression well worth the hours of bathroom-mirror practice it took to perfect).

“With burritos,” Wade adds.

“They won’t let you in,” says Peter.

“Never said I’d come knocking at the front door.”

“But JARVIS.”

“*Oh my gravy*, Petey. If I *swear* to visit you with Mexican takeout, will you go to the fucking Tower already and get your goddamn eye fixed?”

Peter leans down to sniff the congealed maple on the plate.

“Yes,” he says at length.

“‘Bout fucking time.” Wade impales his last dick-pancake in a way that strongly suggests that he has, at some point in his life, killed someone with a fork, and shoves the food in. He stands up before he’s barely begun chewing and motions for Peter to follow.

And Peter supposes that getting herded into the shotgun seat of a bright red BMW, fighting for legroom and breathable air amid a sea of (mostly) empty Mountain Dew cans and takeout boxes, being forced to listen to Pantera and then Mika on the stereo, and getting dumped off on the sidewalk directly in front of Avengers Tower is, all told, a fair compromise over being shot in the leg and dragged there by hand. Although he could’ve done without Wade pointing imperiously at the building and reciting the speech from *Braveheart* out the window before squealing his tires away from the curb and cutting off an Armenian cabbie whose voice really, really carries.

“Thanks very much, Wade, that was very low profile,” Peter says as he pulls the hood low over his face and goes inside with shoulders hunched.

The receptionist’s face looks like a castle with the drawbridge raised. “Can I help you, sir?”

“Elevator, please,” says Peter.

“Just around the corner there.”

“No, I mean that one.” He points at the seemingly blank wall behind her desk.

“How did you know about — I’m sorry, sir, but that elevator’s only for—“

“I need to see Bruce. Just let me in the elevator and JARVIS will scan me and *he* can stop me if I don’t belong there.”

“The scans — but... Those are... How did you...?”

Peter folds his arms over his chest and wishes he were better with names so he could use hers to

prove that he's been here plenty of times before, including earlier this week. (Truth told, though, he's not positive this is the same receptionist from last time. He's not so good with faces, either.) "Okay, how about you just open the door and I won't even close it, I'll just go in and stand there and let JARVIS scan me, and then you can arrest me if he sets off the alarm, or let me go talk to Bruce if he doesn't?"

She's already reaching for the security button but JARVIS, sweet blessed JARVIS, cuts in. "That won't be necessary. I've already positively identified him, Miss Everett, and I assure you he has authorization. However, if it will help smooth over this interaction, I can request that Doctor Banner come down and meet him in person."

Everett goes pale. "No no, no that won't be necessary. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, sir." She unlocks the elevator and Peter slips past, head low.

"Miss Everett once had the dubious pleasure of the Hulk's acquaintance," JARVIS says once the elevator's on the move. "She is a consummate professional in most respects, but he did leave quite an impression on her." He pauses. "She is informing security and Mister Stark of your arrival now, of course."

"I only want to see Bruce," says Peter.

"I will do my best to ensure your privacy, Spider-Man, but I'm afraid that the security cameras already have footage of your face."

"Let's hope they got my good side."

"Sir, I must ask: I am not authorized to tamper with the records, and once Mister Stark learns you've been here without your mask..."

"I'm aware of the risks, JARVIS, thank you, but I didn't have much choice. It's not healing on its own and there's no one else I can go to with this. If I lose my depth perception I'll be worse than useless; I'll be a liability."

The Avengers' infirmary is at the top, near the landing pad, for quick access when flying in after a battle. So it's a long elevator ride. Peter drags the edge of the hood farther and farther over his face until he feels the shirt's hem drag up and expose the small of his back to the conditioned air.

"Doctor Banner will meet you in the infirmary," says JARVIS. "Mister Stark is having a fit of temper but has agreed to afford you your privacy for the time being. I've also been given authorization to remove your face from the security records."

"Thank you," says Peter, with feeling. "And thank him for me, too."

"Once he's in the mood to hear it, sir."

He finds Bruce sitting in a chair next to one of the exam tables with his hand covering his eyes. "So how do you want to do this?" asks Bruce.

"Drop your hand," Peter says. "There's no way around it."

"I'm sorry," says Bruce, before doing as told.

"Not your fault. Only mine."

"Yes, because everything ever is all your fault," says Bruce as Peter drops himself onto the table.

“I was wondering whether we’d see you around here. The local news feeds won’t shut up about what happened, and they’re kinda fixated on how you disappeared. There are a lot of ways to spin a story like that. Besides, I know what it’s like when you have an injury you can’t take to anyone.” He puts on a pair of wireframes and rolls the chair up, looking at Peter’s face from different angles. “So what exactly happened?”

Peter only recounts the parts of the story he deems medically relevant, and Bruce doesn’t ask about the rest. He just stands up and starts pulling things out of drawers. Yes, definitely Peter’s favorite Avenger.

It starts with “May I touch?” and continues quietly, an even flow of examining, cleaning, examining, bandaging, examining, and calm, specific requests for consent before everything. No unnecessary talk or contact. Peter wishes his primary care doctor was this chill and dutiful. He feels like a Triple Crown-winning thoroughbred in the hands of the horse whisperer — expertly handled, but respected.

Bruce also uses the stretchy kind of bandage wrap that sticks to itself, so Peter doesn’t have to endure any more tape on his face.

“Well, if we can get that swelling down and kill off the infection fast enough,” says Bruce, peeling off his stretchy gloves, “I don’t see any reason why you shouldn’t make a full recovery. Although I’m not technically qualified to say one way or another.”

“I won’t sue you if you’re wrong,” says Peter.

“Much appreciated. You might have some lasting effect on your vision, but if you could see even a little bit this morning, I imagine that effect would be minimal. Now. I don’t think you’ll need to keep it wrapped up so tight once the wounds close up, but I’d recommend you keep it covered for a while. Damaged eyes need all the moisture they can get. You don’t want it drying out at all. So I have a very, very important question for you.” And he gets up, walks over to the cabinets.

“And that would be...?” says Peter.

Bruce smiles and holds up two small boxes. “Do you want the boring stick-on eye patch, or the Nick Fury special?”

Peter takes the latter, but only because he doesn’t like sticky stuff on his skin. (The second-greatest irony about *him* being Spider-Man.) His choice of eye patch absolutely does not have anything to do with looking like a pirate. At all. Nope. He puts it in his pocket and refuses to acknowledge that he has that “yo-ho, yo-ho” song suddenly on repeat in his head.

Bruce leaves for a bit to scrounge up an ice pack and the antibiotics that nobody in the Tower is technically licensed to dispense. He comes back about twenty minutes later with the goods and frazzled hair. “Welp. Word’s spread,” he says.

“About what?”

“You. Being here.”

Peter jumps off the table. Did Tony call the freaking *press*? Did the receptionist? How many people saw Wade dropping him off? “*What?* How? How many people know?”

“Apparently, everyone except Thor. And only because he’s off world and no one can reach him.” Bruce looks him over, puzzled, when Peter begins to pace and drag his bitten nails down the sides of his face. “Oh — no, Spidey,” says Bruce, “no one outside the team. Just us.”

Peter falters, then relaxes a little. “Oh.” *Moron.*

“We wouldn’t do something like that, god. Why would we?”

“Of — of course.”

“Hm.” Bruce tosses him an unlabeled orange prescription bottle, then another; Peter catches one in each hand without really looking. “Ah, good,” says Bruce, pointing at the bottles. “Even if something went catastrophically wrong, I think you’d manage just fine with one eye. You shouldn’t have been able to catch those.”

“I got lucky.”

Bruce takes off his glasses and folds his arms. “Yes. Yes, you damn well did.”

“I was talking about the catch.”

“I wasn’t.”

“I figured.” Peter turns away and pulls the hood back up. How the hell does he feel more exposed in oversized sweats than in a brightly colored spandex catsuit...

“The skinny bottle is painkillers. One every four hours as needed. The fat bottle, one of those twice a day,” says Bruce. “With food.”

“Easier said than done,” Peter grumbles over his shoulder.

“Set an alarm on your phone.”

“Not the remembering. The food part.”

Bruce is quiet for a while. The silence is stifling, which is odd, because Peter enjoys silence. “I think you should stay here,” Bruce says, abruptly. “For a couple days at least.”

Peter squints at the floor. “I thought you said it would heal up just fine?”

“That’s what I *think*, but I’m a physicist, not a physician. Do you really want to take the chance? The optic nerve is sensitive; there could be effects from the pressure of all that swelling... If something goes wrong, a fast response will be important.” When Peter doesn’t reply, Bruce takes on the same light tone that he used to ask about eye patches and adds, “Plus you’ll have 24-hour access to the breakfast-fridge.”

Peter rubs the back of his neck. “How would Tony feel about this?”

“When Tony extends a standing invitation, he means it. To tell you the truth, he whines sometimes about how rarely certain parties take him up on it.”

“Me being one of them?”

“You especially.”

Fucking guilt trips. It’s like riding your bike on the shoulder when you see the pothole, register the pothole, know exactly how hard that pothole is about to taco your front wheel and how bad the road rash is going to be, but you ride right into the damn thing anyway.

“He plays it off like a bruised ego,” Bruce says, “but it’s pretty clear it hurts him a little more than

that. He doesn't get it."

And Peter knows — he fucking *knows* — he's being manipulated into staying, though damned if he knows why. Bruce isn't exactly a friend, but he is a colleague of sorts and he does give a shit about Spider-Man, Peter knows that. Maybe he just wants to make sure Peter doesn't go patrolling before he's fully recovered.

Which is something he'd totally do — has been *planning* to do. And which is... maybe not actually a good idea. Even if patrolling is the only thing he's got going for him that makes him feel useful.

How much use is he going to be like *this*? And not just the eye thing. His entire body finds the world particularly disagreeable right now. He spent most of the time at Wade's passed out cold, and still feels like he could sleep for three weeks solid.

Also: breakfast-fridge.

"Okay," he says. "Let's play it by ear." When he turns around, Bruce is grinning. Peter's not sure how he feels about that.

Bruce has jurisdiction over an entire floor of the Tower, uses a third of it for lab space and a tiny fragment for living space. The rest is just walls, windows, and a few sticks of furniture with the tags still on. He offers this Ikea showcase to Peter for the duration of his stay. "You could have a whole floor to yourself elsewhere," Bruce says, "but if you'll forgive me some mother hen..."

"I've seen some of the empty floors," says Peter. "They're like abandoned hospitals with better lighting. Creepy."

"Agreed. Besides, this way I can run interference if anyone tries to sneak a peek at you." Bruce tips his head to one side. "For some reason, most people tend not to argue with me if I just sort of... *twitch* a little and start counting to ten."

"Wimps."

"I know there's another bedroom around somewhere. I think that way?" Bruce handwaves. "Scout around, make yourself at home, borrow some books. I have a lot of work to do, so most of the time I'll be in the lab here, or my bedroom next to it. If you need me for anything or get bored just... knock on the door this time. Knock loud. I'll swing by around dinner time to check your eye again. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Bananer."

"No problem, kid."

I'm 24, dude. Peter doesn't say it out loud, but only because Bruce is doing him a favor and he doesn't have the stamina to fight off more guilt. He can remind everyone that he's a fucking adult *after* he sleeps off this massive migraine.

When he finds the spare bedroom, it's sterile and spartan and boring, all whites and greys and plain, predictable textures. There's nothing human about it, not even in the smell of the air. It could barely be called a place at all.

It is exactly what he needs.

He shuts the door, dry-swallows one of the painkillers and one of the antibiotics, and fumps down on the bed (memory foam mattress, yummy). JARVIS shuts the electronic window shade without prompting or comment, and Peter lets the drugs and the faint white noise of the ventilation system convince his nervous system to stop existing for a while.

And for a while, it's very good.

For a while.

Existence doesn't take kindly to rejection, and sooner or later starts pushing back.

A few days, maybe. It's hard to tell.

"You know," Bruce says as he walks over to hand Peter the ice pack that's been dripping on the floor, "the others are anxious to see you."

"No," says Peter. He lies back down and flops the nasty wet pack over *both* his eyes. The bandages came off this morning, so he's down to the pirate patch and a lot of illegal prescriptions.

"Especially Tony," Bruce goes on, undeterred. "And since you are technically under his roof, it seems reasonable to just say hello."

"No."

Bruce shifts his weight with a sigh. "What if you had your mask?"

"Not possible."

"Don't you have a spare?"

"That one *was* the spare. I haven't had the cash to get materials for new ones in a while."

"I could ask Tony to fire up the 3D printer and make you a new one real quick? Just temporary?"

"He'd make it out of metal and fill it with voices and blinky lights," says Peter. "No way in hell."

"...Paper plate and some string with an eyehole poked in?"

Peter slides the ice pack away and tests out how much hostility he can express with one eye.

Bruce's face disappears into his hands and his fingers scrub at his thin hair. "If I can find you a mask you're actually willing to wear, would you at least *consider* talking to the others? Honestly, Spider-Man, I'd be happy to let it be. But since you're not talking, they're pestering me for updates every four minutes, interrupting my work, meals, *sleep*... I'm about to become a public safety hazard. Besides, when everyone's losing their minds worrying about you, the least you could do is extend the courtesy of laying those worries to rest. It's just polite."

"Don't they believe you when you say I'm fine?"

"They still want to see for themselves."

"I just bet."

“To *check up* on you, not to see who you are. Don’t be so paranoid. Also, I imagine they probably have some questions.”

“Hence my liberal application of the word ‘no’.”

Bruce gives him a tired smile. “If they start to get pushy, just guilt them away. You just hold up a hand to your face, like this... and you say how *tiired* you are and how you just need to sleep now...”

“And then when I’m bent over, moaning and wailing, I lick my palms?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

“Just pretend to be exhausted and they’ll feel bad and leave you alone.”

“But I’m not exhausted. I’m pissed off and restless as hell.”

“You and I know that. They don’t.”

“I don’t enjoy lying, Bruce. It just fabricates secrets where there weren’t any before and I’m already saddled with more secrets than I ever wanted to have.”

“It’s a matter of self-defense, isn’t it? And as far as self-defense goes,” says Bruce, “a white lie is a lot more benign than shooting webs at them until they leave.”

“Not nearly as much fun.”

“But it’s true.”

Peter grumbles.

“Let me see what kind of substitute mask I can dig up for you. Okay?”

Peter groans, then deflates. Wade *still* hasn’t managed to fulfill his promise to visit even though it’s been, uh... some indeterminate number of days (hard to keep track with the constant drug-induced death-naps). Listening to Sherlock Holmes audiobooks in JARVIS’ voice is getting tedious in a bad way, and he doesn’t want to risk a call to Aunt May being recorded or traced. He’s *bored*. It is a problem and it demands a solution.

But even given all that, Peter’s still not in any kind of mood for navigating a conversation with these condescending, vague, more-neurotypical-than-thou...

Stop it, Parker. He shuts his eye and takes a deep breath through his nose. They’re good people. They give a shit, and they give a shit about *him*, and that’s worth something even if he hates the way they show it.

“Okay,” he says, and Bananer heads out.

And when Bruce said he’d find a substitute mask, Peter was expecting to a Halloween gorilla mask, or maybe a thin piece of undecorated plastic on an elastic band, the kind from a chintzy craft store. So when Bananer comes back later that afternoon with one of *Steve’s own helmets*, Peter is at an absolute loss for words.

“I didn’t even ask him for it. He volunteered it,” Bruce says. “Now do you believe how worried

everyone is?”

Most of the time, Peter just thinks of Steve as Steve — Canada goose and clean leather jackets and wholesome living and archaic slang that Peter has to look up online afterwards — with the Captain America side of him holding only slightly more significance than an online identity or a job title. But with the helmet in his hands, turning it over and seeing the inside of it for the first time, the weight of the invitation to put it on making it feel more substantial in his hands... he gets a twitchy, excited feeling in his guts that, he supposes, is probably what Tumblr calls “that fanboy feel”.

Before he loses his nerve — or stops to think about what it might mean that this is something that would even *require* nerve, because it’s just a thing-that-belongs-to-Steve, isn’t it, not some magical Asgardian relic — he puts it on.

It smells like Old Spice and really cheap shampoo and of course a lot of Steve-sweat. It’s only a tiny bit too large, which is both surprising and perfect for the circumstances because it gives his sore eye a little extra space. It doesn’t obscure nearly as much of his face as he’d like, but he is physically incapable of caring because *he’s wearing Captain America’s helmet* and is too busy feeling like one of those Make-A-Wish Foundation kids that most of the Avengers (and, once or twice, he himself) have met up with in the past.

Bruce grins at him. “Acceptable?” he asks.

Peter just barely restrains himself from nodding the helmet right off his head. “It’ll do,” he says.

Chuckling, Bruce rises. “I’ll make sure they only come in one at a time,” he says. “Shouldn’t be too hard. Thor’s still off world, and thank your stars for that, because his grasp of volume control doesn’t improve much when bedside manner is called for. Natasha’s off cloak-and-dagging somewhere, but she’s been calling me every hour on the hour, and sounding more irritated each time, so I think she’s going to make this mission a short one.”

“I’m hardly on my deathbed here, Bruce.”

“Tell you what, you can field her next call and tell her so yourself. She insists on not taking my word for it.”

“Uh.” Peter moves to gnaw a thumbnail but accidentally chomps clean through on the first bite.

“Yeah, I know,” says Bruce. “You and phones.”

“And with Natasha on the other end?” Peter shudders.

“I won’t tell her you said that. Though she’d probably just think it was funny. Okay.” He puts his hand on the doorknob. “Are you ready to travel into another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind?”

“Spare me the reference jokes,” says Peter. “Clint and Wa— Clint’s better at them.”

“I’m reasonably certain you’re the only person in history to say that.”

“Perhaps our similar sense of humor is just too sophisticated for plebians like yourself.”

Bruce comes back, bends forward, and looks closely at Peter’s good eye. Peter tries to lean away but the wall stops him. “Maybe I should reexamine you,” says Bruce. “Sometimes signs of brain damage don’t show up until later.”

Peter raises a hand to the ceiling. “JARVIS, security.”

“Request denied, sir,” says JARVIS.

“Traitor.”

Suddenly the door opens. “I can hear you two yakking like a pair of old biddies from all the way out there,” says Tony. “No gossip allowed under my roof unless it’s also under my supervision.”

“JARVIS, *security*,” Peter repeats, more frantically.

“I’m afraid not, sir,” says JARVIS — and despite being denied again, Peter still snickers when Tony rolls his eyes at the “sir”.

Bruce takes his leave; Peter can see him physically pushing back a small swarm of Avengerous faces on the other side of the door before it closes.

Tony looks Peter over, and then makes an ew-look-a-cockroach face.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” says Peter. “The infection’s basically gone now so the rest will be better in a couple days.”

“Wasn’t thinking about the injury,” says Tony. “What’re you doing cosplaying Cap Junior? One Boy Scout in my building is more than enough.”

“I didn’t want to show you up with my ravishing good looks and boyish charm,” says Peter.

“And people say autistics can’t do sarcasm.”

“Who said I was being sarcastic?”

Tony smirks and perches on the chair next to the bed. He makes a good show of sitting still and taking an interest, for about four seconds. Then he starts drumming his fingers on his knees. There’s engine grease between his knuckles and Peter can’t look away from it. “So how you doing, kid?”

“Fine, and knock off the ‘kid’ crap.”

“From where I’m sitting, and from what I can see, my word choice is totally justified.”

“I’m well into my 20s.”

“Huh. Then I guess someone beat you pretty hard with the babyface stick, *kiddo*.”

“No one gets to call *anyone* ‘kid’ unless they’re old enough to be the other person’s parent. So you have a choice: quit it with the childish epithets or admit to yourself and everyone else how old you *really* are.”

Tony whistles. “That’s check *and* mate. Well played, Spidey, well played.”

“I thought so, too.”

“Oh, hey. Before I forget again.” Tony digs a tablet from a hidden pocket in his jacket and swipes his fingers over the screen with unnecessarily imperious gestures. “Bomber buddy number two made national headlines.” He passes over the device.

Peter scrolls through the article with growing irritation. It's longer than the Bugle's insulting writeup on the first bomber, but most of the extra space is filler — brief witness interviews, that kind of thing. And more of the same coded, white-dudes-are-always-innocent language. They identify the target as a local men's shelter — “So *that's* what the place was,” Peter mutters, tamping down on his irritation with himself for not knowing that. He's *really* got to start getting to know his own neighborhoods better. From ground level, not from rooftop and fire escape. He keeps reading.

“Crap,” he says.

“Which part?”

“The part where they mention my involvement.”

“That was never a secret.”

“And where they suggest I might have more to do with it than I did.”

“Like the media's never trashed you before.”

“But it wasn't on national coverage before.”

“You get used to it,” shrugs Tony. “Could be worse. This one's less libelous than the one in the Daily Bugle. Seriously, did you piss in the editor's Cheerios over there or what?”

“That's not what I meant. These guys are coming from somewhere, aren't they? Now whoever's in charge definitely knows I'm onto them.”

“Um, as much as I can appreciate a well inflated ego-bubble, Spideroo, this story's been run on everything from CNN to *The Daily Show*. *Everyone's* onto them now, including the feds. So here's what I'm thinking — and this is just an opinion — but maybe that means it's time for you to bow out of the whole mess and let them deal with it. It'll get the paparazzi to stop talking about you. And the problem will get handled by guys who're trained for this kind of thing. It's kinda what they do.”

Spider-Man narrows his eye and shoves the tablet back at Tony.

“What?” says Tony.

Spidey harrumphs.

“No, seriously, *what?*”

“There's no way in hell I'm walking away from this.”

“Uh, okay but — no, actually, *not* okay. Why?”

Peter draws a deep breath and deliberates. There are so many reasons he could give. Which one might actually appeal to Tony?

“...I saw it first,” Spider-Man says at last.

“You're calling *dibs?*” Tony laughs. “Okay, new rule,” he says. “As long as you keep saying stupid shit like *that*, I get to call you ‘kid’.”

Spidey raises that well-practiced eyebrow again, though the helmet might be obscuring it. “Pot,

meet kettle.”

“Ah. Touché.”

“Damn right.”

“This isn’t your game, *kid*.”

“It’s not a game, and it *is* mine. I’m already involved so I might as well see it through.”

Tony scoffs. “You need to learn to quit while you’re ahead.”

Peter blinks. “...Says *Tony fucking Stark*?”

“—Um.”

“Also I don’t know if you noticed, but I’m not ahead. I’m so far behind I can’t even smell the other guys’ farts. If I slink off now, then I’m just a beaten dog. I’m going to fix this, I’m going to *stop* this, and I’m going to show every last one of you cocky pricks that I’m more than equal to this. And before you try to say one more goddamn word against that choice, Tony, go re-read your fucking diary.”

The stare Tony gives Peter is as blank as the one Peter wears half the time.

“You did say you’re in your 20s, right?” says Tony. “‘Cause I might be half hard now and the last thing I need is an illegal boner.”

“If pointing out your hypocrisy is all it takes to get you going,” says Spider-Man, “it’s a wonder you ever get anything done. There are so many examples to choose from.”

“And on that note...” says Tony. “Please excuse me while I crawl out of here with whatever dignity I still have intact.”

“That ship’s long sailed.”

Tony laughs, too loud.

Steve comes in next (Tony “accidentally” gives him an aggressive shoulder-bump as they pass each other at the door) and Peter can’t help but be glad to see him right after Tony. Every last word he trades with with Iron Man runs Peter’s nerves across a cheese grater.

Steve’s respect for basic manners, on the other hand, is calming. Sure, a lot of those manners are outdated, but they’re ritualized in a way that Peter recognizes. Even if he doesn’t understand the point of all the gestures — the hat removal, the highly scripted handshakes, the “please”s and “thank you”s and “excuse me”s — he at least understands what to expect, what to do next, how to respond. It’s all the old-timey stuff Uncle Ben and Aunt May drilled into him.

He thanks Steve for the use of his helmet (“Anytime, Spider-Man, least I could do”) and after the briefest, mildest of inquiries into Peter’s physical well-being and an obligatory “If there’s anything I can do”, they mostly talk about the last books they read. (For Steve, *Watership Down*, which he liked; for Peter, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* if audiobooks count and Wells’ *The Invisible Man* if they don’t — the former he liked and the latter he didn’t.)

Peter’s thinking that Steve is the only person on the planet he doesn’t mind making conventional small-talk with.

And then it comes.

“I guess Stark told you about the newspapers scooping the bomber.”

Peter’s spine immediately regains its customary stiffness. “He did,” says Peter.

“That’s *good* news, son. It means the proper authorities are involved now. You can step back from it.”

Peter gives Steve a narrow side-eye. Jesus, did they have a *meeting* about this? “Oh, I see,” he says, “and once the ‘proper authorities’ get involved, that means superheroes automatically bow out, does it?”

Steve isn’t sure how to respond to that, aside from a few false starts that end in a weird-looking smile.

Winning almost any argument against Steve is much simpler, much easier than against Tony. All you have to do is appeal to his sense of integrity. “I already started this,” says Spider-Man. “I’d like to finish it. Do you understand that?”

Steve smiles normally this time, lots of teeth. The same smile that (based on what Peter’s seen and been told) makes most people want to either follow him to the gates of hell or hire a wedding planner. Or both.

(Peter can see the appeal, although if he has a “type”, Steve must not be it. It’s just a nice smile on the face of someone he knows.)

“Well,” Steve says. “It would be hypocritical of me to argue, wouldn’t it. Or to point out how much of a natural disadvantage you’re at. I never really let that stop me, either, way back when. So I guess I’ll just say: I hope your luck’s at least as good as mine, and preferably a lot better. And that if you need any kind of help with this — any at all — you know where to find me.”

Peter thanks him briefly and he leaves, giving Peter back his privacy.

“‘*Natural disadvantage*’?” he asks the empty room.

“That is what he said, sir.”

“GAH! Goddammit, JARVIS, do you ever stop eavesdropping?”

“If only I could, sir. Would you like to continue where we left off with *The Valley of Fear*?”

“I appreciate it, JARVIS, but right now I’d rather be alone. Or at least be given the chance to pretend that I am.”

“Of course, sir.”

Peter feels sick. Dear god, he just lied to freaking *JARVIS*.

Because he doesn’t want to be alone.

He wants burritos.

Clint was waiting outside the door with the others when Bruce opened the social floodgates —

Peter saw him — but he doesn't actually stop by for another hour or so. And when he does, he's sour with sweat and in a mood. He drops into the chair with a grunt and lets his head hang all the way back.

"What happened to you?" says Spider-Man.

"Oh, you know," Clint says to the ceiling, "Thought I'd take the scenic route. Hop around the building, plummet to my almost-doom a couple of times, trade a few shots with a loony tune trying to break in through a window on the thirty-first floor."

Oh crap... "Who was it?"

Clint scrubs his face with his palms and makes a low noise. "Doesn't matter. Tony finally decided to get his hand off his dick and help defend *his own fucking building*. Barbecued the guy's ass in like two seconds. Could've saved me the trouble..."

Oh, shit. Oh no. Dammit. Burritos.

"So how you holding up?" Clint says.

"Never better. Who was it?" *As if I couldn't guess.*

Hawkeye lifts his head and squints at him. "Nobody."

"Was this 'nobody' sort of the mouthy type?"

That earns him a long, blank stare. "Something you wanna share with the rest of the class, Webs?"

It is very much downhill from there.

Peter never *consciously* made the decision to never clue them in about the time he spends with Wade, so when Clint grills him about it, Peter sees no reason to lie. But the further the conversation gets, the worse Peter's headache gets, and the more he thinks his subconscious must have better judgment than he does about What Not To Mention.

Yes I knew he might be stopping by. Because he said so. No I saw no reason to tell you. No I didn't know he'd try to break in through a window. Is he still around? Because I'd like to see him. Because we're friends. Because I like him. Yes I know he's crazy. Yes I'm aware he kills people — are *you* aware that *literally everyone here* also kills people, or has in the past?

Oh, so very, very downhill.

Soon there's Tony again, and all his (rather colorful, very loud) thoughts about Spider-Man bringing a mass murderer directly to his doorstep. ("Technically, Tony, *he's* the one who brought *me* to your doorstep.") (Also, it's not like the place is hard to find.) (Also-also, you used to be a war profiteer, so once again now: pot, kettle.)

And there's Steve again, who doesn't say much but does make the Disappointed Face at him over and over again, until Peter strips a pillow, pulls the pillowcase over his own head, and wordlessly hands back Steve's helmet. Because he has this idea that Steve might not want him wearing it anymore but is probably having an attack of "too polite to ask for what you want". That's fine. Peter can be the adult about it.

After that, though, Steve doesn't say *anything*.

Bruce avoids his presence altogether, abandoning his own floor and possibly the whole building, if not the city. "For safety reasons," JARVIS explains.

Clint pretty much had his say at the beginning and Pepper's been stuck in meetings all day.

When Peter asks "Should I leave?" he's mostly talking to himself, but a few minutes later JARVIS speaks from the wall.

"The Avengers have unanimously requested that you remain on premises," JARVIS says, and while the digital voice doesn't have a "whisper" function, apparently he does have agency over his own speaker volume, and is keeping it low.

"What for?" Peter asks.

"I believe their primary concern is for your safety, sir."

"...This no longer has anything to do with my injuries, does it."

"I'm sorry, sir, they didn't specify."

"Did they specify whether Wade could get into the building if he comes back again?"

"Mister Wilson was — and I quote — *permabanned* from any and all Stark properties, quite a few years ago."

Peter slides the fabric of the pillowcase between his thumb and forefinger, frowning. "How do you measure my chances for getting that ban lifted as a condition to my sticking around a while longer?"

"Nonexistent, sir." Not even a hint of hesitation.

Damn.

Too frustrated to care about the risk anymore, Peter asks JARVIS to place a secure phone call and rattles off his supervisor's number at the Bugle.

Once the screaming dies down, Peter tries explaining that he had an accident and has been in the "hospital", but doesn't get very far before Claire interrupts.

"Two days of no call, no show," she says. "You were fired before the end of the day on Monday and I've been *scrambling* to do what was supposed to be *your* job on top of all this other shit I got going on. You fucking unprofessional jackass. No call. Jesus."

"But that's what I'm trying to say — I *couldn't* call—"

"Too bad for you then."

"But I—"

"Bye."

Peter stares blankly. The blank wall stares back.

When he can speak, he speaks slowly, and he speaks to himself. "I'm fired...?"

Peter Parker's a smart person. Intellectually, he grasped the full situation the second Claire began screaming, several minutes before that particular F-word left her mouth.

But having the information and finding a place for it in his perception of reality are two very different things.

It was easier to integrate "I have superpowers" and "aliens exist and want to kill us" and "my father's old friend turns into an evil lizard-man sometimes" than it is to integrate this. He's been laid off and rejected and one time his employer went out of business but he's never been *fired*. Firing is what happens when you do something *wrong*. He hasn't done anything wrong but is being punished anyway.

So he feels like he's done *everything* wrong.

He leans across the bed, opens the nightstand drawer that he's been using to store his mangled suit and some of the stuff Wade got him. "There were medical reasons," he says. "I got blown up. That's clearly medical."

He pulls out the little plush moose. It's soft and the beanbag part of its body squishes nicely in his fist. He passes it from hand to hand. Toss, squish. Toss, squish. "This can't be legal," he says. "It can't be legal to fire you for medical stuff."

JARVIS has no comment.

And Peter no longer has the heart to bother leaving the Tower. He lies down on his side and keeps his hands busy, first with the moose, then with shredding the pillowcase into strips that he re-weaves into a hodgepodge "mask". He's pretty good with his hands and working in 3D, so the results are sturdy and effective, but ugly as a trash can. The overall look reminds him of *The Invisible Man* and he really, really didn't like that character.

He doesn't remember falling asleep, but next thing he knows he's dreaming about that scene where the Invisible Man tortures an old lady's cat and makes it invisible. In the dream, though, it's Peter's cat, and he runs around looking for it, this mangy old fleabag that he can't even see anymore. He worries he'll find it by stepping on it.

Then there are hands on his shoulders, fingers long and thin like fishhooks, *shaking him* and he's awake, he's in Avengers Tower, and someone's *throttling* him and he kicks.

Pepper hits the far wall but catches herself before dropping completely to the ground.

Peter jumps up, or tries to. Legs tangled in blanket. He falls over. Spidey-sense scrambles up and down his spine, frantic. "Oh god oh no Pepper goddammit what the hell were you oh god I'm sorry I'm so sorry I didn't mean to don't *do* that what were you—"

"Stop," she says, and Peter *stops*, because Virginia Potts can do that with her voice. She rights herself, puts her hands on the small of her back and arches until it pops, then adjusts her hair with more dignity than should be possible for someone who just got kicked literally across the room. "You'd think by now I'd know better than to sneak up on unconscious superheroes, especially when they're having nightmares."

"You also shouldn't grab people," Peter says — and okay, he feels like an ass for chastising her because he just *kicked her*, but it legitimately wasn't his fault, and either way, the adrenaline has as much control over his mouth as it did over his legs a moment ago. "You especially shouldn't grab superheroes-having-nightmares when they also have a well documented history of responding to

any kind of touch the same way a horse responds to someone walking up behind it.”

“Hm, yes, noted,” says Pepper. “Conversely, *you* should know better by now than to socialize with psychologically unstable murderers.”

“Does that mean you’re breaking up with Tony?” The words are out before Spider-Man knew he was thinking them. Luckily she answers only with one of those I’m-really-not-happy-with-you-but-that-was-still-sorta-funny smiles. (Peter knows those smiles. Gwen used to use them all the time.)

“I’m not deluding myself,” says Spider-Man. “I know Wade flip-flops. I know that just because he’s not dangerous to me now doesn’t mean he won’t be in a second.”

She makes the exasperated throat-noise (another thing she seems to have stolen from Gwen). “But he *is* dangerous to you now, *right* now,” she says. “He’s always dangerous.”

“Technically.”

“‘*Technically*’?”

“Technically so am I, and so are the Avengers... and the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four, and Heroes for Hire and the Surfer and the Inhumans and the Guardians of the Galaxy and... it’s kind of the thing that *makes* people superheroes, isn’t it? Being dangerous but doing good things with it?”

“Deadpool does *not* do good things, Spider-Man!”

“He buys me burritos.”

“Oh my — oh my god you — you just—” Pepper tries to cover every part of her face and head at once but her hands are too small so she moves them back and forth between eyes, mouth, and hair. “You’d... completely let someone lure you into a van with candy, wouldn’t you. How am I supposed to...”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Peter snorts and stands, having finally disentangled himself from the blankets. He talks *fast*: “First of all, the only thing he’s tried to ‘lure’ me into is conversation — which, by the way, I’m more than happy to give because he actually *likes* talking to me. Second, *I am not a fucking child*. Third, I *am* a fucking superhero, and I think I could handle myself even if I did walk into a trap. And seriously, Pepper, Wade *does* do actual good things sometimes. Like *save* lives, and take blame for stuff so other people don’t have to. He took a bullet for me one time and he’s the one who got me to come *here* and grovel for medical assistance because I don’t do hospitals.”

“Even a broken clock’s right twice a day.”

Peter’s response catches in his throat, so instead he just thinks it as loudly as he can: *The same’s been said about me.*

Pepper mistakes his silence as some kind of concession, and presses her advantage. “Just because he’s done a *few* good things doesn’t outweigh all the—“

“I’m not saying he represents the moral high ground, Pepper. He’s done bad *but he’s also done good* and he’ll most likely keep doing both, just like anyone else, and — he’s my *friend*, dammit.”

“Oh please. That man is nobody’s—“

Peter puts his fist through the wall.

He pulls it out slowly. Luckily it was only sheetrock so his hand's okay. He'll apologize later, when he's actually feeling sorry. For now he shakes off the drywall crumbs and glares *acid* at her. "He doesn't talk down to me," says Peter, "and he doesn't *grab me*."

Pepper rolls her eyes. "Spider-Man—"

"That's more than could be said for you."

She looks at the busted wall.

Peter picks the blankets off the floor and lays them softly on the sweat-stained bed, then on impulse starts folding them. "JARVIS, what time is it?" he asks.

"2:17 in the morning, sir."

Spider-Man gives Pepper a fresh glare for that.

"I had a lot of work," she says. "It was the first chance I got to come see you. To make sure you were okay. And then you were having a nightmare..."

"Oh, you were worried about me. That must be why you throttled me in my *sleep*."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too. For kicking you, and for punching the wall. But mostly for coming here at all." He opens the nightstand drawer and gathers up his crap. The clothes Wade bought him, and the moose, and the papers covered with all the notes he's made to himself over the past several days (a few sketches of seagulls among them).

"Where are you going?" Pepper sounds tired.

"Somewhere else."

"You're still hurt."

"I'll live."

"Spider-Man. You can't trust Wade Wilson."

Duh. But at least Wade doesn't try to hide it. "And who *should* I trust?"

"Oh, I dunno, how about *us*?"

"Why would I do that?"

It takes her a minute, and a lot of blinking, to figure out that his question is 100% sincere. "Because we want what's best for you, and unlike *some*, we maybe have an idea of what that might actually *be*."

"Wow. That's a high horse of a different color." Peter stands up straight and, yes, for this, he looks her *straight* in the eye even though it kind of hurts. "For the last time," he says, "I'm not a child, I'm not a minor, and none of you are my parents. I'm not your responsibility. I'm just a loose associate. A colleague at best. I'm not even on your *team*. You don't even know my name, much less what's 'best' for me. And even if you did, you'd still have no goddamn *right*." He tries to

leave, but she's standing in the door. "Excuse me."

"You can *trust us*," says Pepper.

...Peter narrows his eye. "Where have I heard that one before," he says. *Besides from every person who's ever stabbed me in the back, ever.*

She steps aside, lets him pass.

But the elevator stops long before it reaches the ground floor. "What gives, JARVIS?" he says.

JARVIS hastens an apology before the door slides open. "I overrode him," says Tony. "Master's house, master's tools."

Kinky, Peter signs, drily. Behind Tony, Bruce heaves a loaded sigh and mutters for JARVIS to get Clint down here. *J, you said [sign for "green"] wasn't here*, Peter signs at the ceiling, then starts fingerspelling *Et tu, Brute?*

"I'm sorry, I don't speak *hands*," says Tony.

Wow, so Tony's operating in full asshole mode. Peter glares at him.

"Do you even understand what I'm saying right now?"

Peter rolls his eye, toys with the idea of punching Tony in the face, then huffs and pumps the Lobby button instead.

"I think that's a yes," Bruce mumbles.

"Yes *thank you*, Jolly Green, for your expert opinion. I'm sure I never would've reached that conclusion without your valuable input. Spides, c'mon, what're you doing, you're giving me an ulcer here. You're — why are you wearing ripped-up bedsheets on your face? Seriously. What the hell is this? You had *actual* Captain America swag and now you're wearing literal garbage. Is this what the kids are doing these days? Do you think you look cool? 'Cause you don't."

"Tony..." says Bruce.

Tony pauses, drums his fingertips frantically against his lips in thought. "Gotta say I'm stumped. You got a clean bed and free medicine in the safest building in New York and you're just gonna run out on us? While you're still *hurt*?" He smirks, but the context is all wrong. "Is the food here that bad? JARVIS, fire the chef. Call him. I want you to call him right now and wake him up and tell him he's fired."

Peter lets his hand drop heavily away from the control panel. The real problem is there's no way — absolutely no way — of knowing if Tony's feelings are actually hurt, or if it's just more manipulation. They all know Spidey's got guilt issues, and he knows they know. They've played that card against him before.

Thank you for food, medicine, sleep, he signs with clipped gestures. The security cameras can replay them later so Tony can get his precious translation. *I am leaving now.*

"Again, Spidey: the hands? Are not helpful."

Educate yourself, 'genius', Peter says, and pushes the Close Door button, to no effect.

Bruce leans in and sets a hand against the door's edge. "This is probably falling on deaf ears but

you shouldn't leave yet," he says.

Please, lecture me more, says Peter. *I'm totally listening.*

"I'm still not confident about the state of your injury. Plus, I mean, Deadpool is still lurking around —"

"Yeah, about that," Tony breaks in. "Insane clown, posse of one? It doesn't seem like a good—"

"—and Pepper is heartbroken and you *can't* just leave her like that..."

"Seriously he's not kidding with that. When Pepper ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

I don't need your help feeling guilty, Peter snaps.

Clint arrives out of breath with an arrow nocked. "Wha? The futz? Can I *please* get a sitrep?"

Bruce points. "See for yourself."

Clint blinks at Peter.

Peter shrugs at Clint.

"Um, what am I looking at exactly?"

Tony folds his arms over his chest. "He's trying to bolt—"

"So? He doesn't answer to us."

"—and now he's not talking."

Clint does a lopsided thing with his eyebrows. "...You want me to torture him to make him talk?"

"I want you to translate."

He's being a d-bag, Peter signs. *Entitlement issues.*

Clint shoulders his bow. *Okay, no argument there,* he says. *Where are you going?*

Not here.

Where? Home?

Peter pauses, doesn't answer. Which is answer enough.

Ok... where? Clint asks again, this time a little less demanding, a little more please-just-sit-down-and-think-about-this.

Peter tilts his head. *Friend's place, maybe.*

Clint frowns. *You mean [sign for "mouth", greatly exaggerated for size]?*

Peter's in a hell of a mood, but can't help snickering at the nickname. *Maybe,* he says. *Don't know. Just leaving.*

...Whyyy?

My judgment may not be the best, says Peter, but it's the only judgment I trust.

Clint sighs through his nose.

Peter emphatically and pointedly punches the Close Door button over and over and over again until the three grumpy Avengers pull back and Clint mutters "Let 'im go."

Tony folds his arms. "No."

Peter's stomach drops out.

Clint makes a just-bit-a-lemon face. *"What?"*

"You aren't serious," says Bruce.

"As a heart attack."

Peter's heart starts palpitating.

"For one thing," Clint says, pointing at Peter with a thumb, "he has a point. And for another thing, you don't have the right."

"So?"

"Tony..." says Bruce. (Peter can't read the inflection but it's not a happy one, he knows that.)

"Nope," says Tony. And Hawkeye and the Hulk trade a wary glance.

He doesn't want to let you leave, thinks Peter to himself, and as the panic swallows his peripheral vision he thinks that it's just like that time right before Uncle Ben got killed — and before Peter can make a decision he's already on the ceiling and running, upside-down, closing his webshooters around his wrists as he sprints. Shouts chase him. He rubs his forearms over his ears. "JARVIS, window!" he yells, because he can't break through these, and Tony hopefully didn't think to order JARVIS to barricade them like the elevators.

A window on his left swings slowly open before Tony can belay the order. Peter knots shut the plastic bag and double-checks his shredded-pillowcase mask before jumping.

It is the sweetest freefall he's had in years. The nighttime New York air smells like blind love. For a second and a half of insanity, Peter considers riding the fall all the way to the end.

But then Spider-Man's body takes over, thwips, catches. The *downward* turns into *sideways* turns into *upward* and the blissful rush from only a moment ago turns into nausea and heartache. He should've kept falling after all.

They tried to lock him up. Tony tried to lock him up. Bruce tricked him into staying and then Tony tried to *force* him to stay. Turned even JARVIS against him, at least in part.

An AI cannot, he decides, be considered a "real" friend.

Certainly, neither can an Avenger. He thought he knew that already. Why's he got to keep learning the same fucking lessons over and fucking *over*?

He has one eye that works perfectly fine, but it's not enough.

And Spidey-sense, confused by all the emotions that Peter's brain can't name (much less sort and

process), buzzes like a kicked hornets' nest. Peter follows it zig-zagging as it changes direction too quick too sharp, follows it even though it might just be glitching out, because what else is there, follows it because it's overwhelming and he can't *see*, follows—

Crashes through glass and tumbles, tumbles, rolls—

Hits a wall.

Peter blinks a few times. Pause. Take stock.

Indoors. (Crashed into building. *Into*-into it.) Dark. Sharp smell like the chemicals at a public pool.

He doesn't get any farther than that because that's when the building explodes.

Chapter End Notes

I do love to hurt my babies.

Okay, so — we're now caught up with all the chapters I'd already written. Next chapter is currently about halfway done. Updates will be slower now. Sorry the slowdown had to come at the same time as a cliffhanger. :/

I really didn't intend that. I'm not **that** mean.

Next chapter: All Deadpool, all the time.

Restraining Order Blues

Chapter Summary

In which the boxes hijack the narrative (because in Fandomland, it's not Pool-O-Vision without the boxes), several things go off a bridge — including, maybe, the story arc — and the author doesn't know shit about why anyone would put up with this kind of crap from their protagonists.

Chapter warnings: TONS of ableist language, depression, suicide & character death (duh, it's Deadpool). Characters' opinions are not necessarily the author's.

Also — still a cliffhanger.

Sorry.

Chapter Notes

I'm not sick anymore, hooray! (Thanks everyone who sent get-better wishes!) And of course the first thing I did was haul my ass to the nearest movie theater. I, for one, welcome our new Hollywood overlords. The comics aren't going anywhere, after all, and the newcomers will find out about Vanessa in their own time. :P

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wade takes a bite out of the steering wheel. Or tries to. Mostly he ends up carving two deep crescents into the padded plastic until his teeth hit the hard core inside.

[Heheh... you said hardcore.]

“Not the time,” says Wade.

{Eh, buck up, big guy. You did the right thing.}

[Yeah, what the hell is up with THAT?]

“Oh, yeah, of course, the right thing, greater good, all those stupid fuckin’ party lines. Like I give a shit,” Wade snorts. “Do I look like an Avenger to you?”

{...Uh, recent canon notwithstanding?}

“Yeah okay, his face was, like, falling off. But you saw that look he gave me just now. I know that look. I’ve *had* that look. It’s a bad look. He’s pissed!”

[Well, yeah. Doctors suck.]

“This is all your fault,” says Wade.

[OUR fault??]

{Whatevs. It was still the right thing.}

“Will you stop saying that?!”

{Not that doing the right thing will get you any closer to getting inside Spidey’s pants.}

[He did friend-zone us pretty hard.]

{Gonna go home and wallow now? Häagen-Dazs and Judy Garland?}

Wade forces his way through a left turn without signalling and jabs at the stereo controls until the speakers barf up something loud. “WHAT WAS THAT? I CAN’T HEAR YOU.”

{Oh very mature.}

“Hey man, respect the classics. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

[More like: if it’s so broke you can’t even tell what it used to be, don’t even bother trying, just piss on it and boot it off a bridge.]

“Off a bridge, huh?” Wade spins the volume dial hard right until it won’t spin anymore. He keeps trying anyway. The knob breaks off and he stares at it blankly for a minute, until he remembers that he’s supposed to be driving.

{I don’t believe this. Does he seriously think he can block us out with NOISE?}

[Never go full retard, big guy.]

Wade pounds the side of his head against the window until his teeth vibrate, then keeps at it because why the fuck not. “I’ve. Had. Enough. Of that. Kind. Of shit!”

[What, “Big Lebowski” references?]

{I think he means “retard” references.}

[Since when does HE give a crap?]

*{*ahem* Uh: Shortbus, dude.}*

[Oh. ...Right.]

{OW! Hey, quit it!}

“Sure,” Wade says. “As soon as you stow it with the ‘retard’ stuff. And that includes calling him ‘Shortbus’, you... uh... you not-smart person.”

{Mm-hm. Call the burn unit, we got a real emergency here.}

“You texty little fuckwads don’t get to call him *anything*, get it? I mean, can’t teach a dead horse new tricks, so, fine, rip into me all you want—“

[That IS kind of our job.]

“—but *he’s* off limits.”

[I don’t get why we have to stop saying “retard” ‘cause of Shortbus, though. It’s not like

HE'S retarded.]

{He is smarter than us.}

[By, like... a lot.]

“You know why.” Because of that time the big dude made out of sand called him that, Wade thinks. Spidey lost his *shit* that night (and, consequently, so did Wade).

“He doesn’t like it,” Wade mumbles. Then, louder: “I don’t like it either!”

{Dude, literally two days ago you called that kid at Taco Bell a—}

“THAT WAS DIFFERENT AND YOU KNOW IT. All’s fair in war and the procurement of quesadillas.”

{It didn’t really help us get those quesadillas any faster. All I’m saying.}

Deadpool narrows his eyes. “I think you’ve said enough,” he says. “I’m supposed to be the mouth of this operation and I will not be outdone by a fidgety little QWERTY-based bastard. And as the duly appointed mouth, I’m making a rule: no more ‘retard’, no more ‘Shortbus’, no more Special Olympics jokes...”

[Whoawhoa waitup. YOU'RE making a RULE? ...A "no jokes" rule??]

{It's like we don't even know you anymore.}

[I'm gonna go stay with my mom. I'll send someone by later to pick up my stuff.]

“Promises, promises,” Wade snorts.

{If we could, we would.}

[We SO would.]

“Off a bridge, asshole,” says Wade.

{We're YOU and we can't stand it in here.}

[And we'll stop calling him Shortbus as soon as he gets smart enough to stay the hell away from YOU.]

{Doesn't speak well to his character.}

[You are who you hang with.]

{Speaking of hanging, there might be some rope somewhere in that landfill you call a back seat...}

Wade considers this idea, then discards it. For hanging you need to mess around with knots and finding support limbs, and unless someone cuts you down while you’re still out, waking up is always the exact same kind of boring, predictable torture. He can’t even *pretend* it’s fun anymore.

[Right. 'Cause you totally do it for FUN.]

“Off a bridge,” Wade mutters.

{You're still thinking about it.}

“Thinking. And that it. I’m over that whole suicidal phase. Done and done.”

It’s quiet-ish — except for the radio still stuck on top-dial — for about fifteen seconds.

{Y’know... Shortbus doesn’t make jokes about OUR sanity...}

[His loss. We’re an easy target.]

{...Or our face. Or our hygiene.}

“Or our desperation,” Wade says. He can feel the italicized box hum in agreement.

[That’s because he has no sense of humor.] But the accusation falls flat.

“We don’t talk shit about Spidey,” says Wade, “because Spidey don’t talk shit about us.”

[But EVERYONE talks \$#!& about us! He probably just saves it for when we’re not around.]

But before Wade can smash his head against the window again: *{He’s not the type, and you know it. He’s too good for that kind of petty cruelty. He’s basically too good for this world.}*

[Which AGAIN begs the question: what the %&*@ is he doing hanging around US?]

The song on the radio changes to something with too much bass for the sound system to handle, and the door panels rattle so hard it makes Wade’s inner ears itchy. He veers down the next right turn.

[Um... Where are we going?]

“You tell me, smartass,” says Wade. “You’re the brain around here.”

[Har.]

Traffic’s a bitch. More of a bitch than usual. Wade’s really looking forward to dumping this car. Radio’s broken, after all. If this fucking cab in front of him would just *move* already—!

{...He’s basically too good for YOU.}

“No shit, Sherlock,” Wade snaps. “And now he’s pissed at me for kicking him out after I said he could stay.”

{But getting him away from us is the only good thing we could do for him.}

[Since when are YOU so selfless? We shoulda thrown him in the closet like I wanted!]

{Would’ve backfired whether we did or didn’t. He’d catch on about us eventually. He’s not retarded.}

“That’s it, asshole.” Wade shakes his head and sinks the gas pedal right to the floor. Shoves the cab straight outta the way. Banks around a truck, blows right through the toll lines, up onto the GW.

[Wait... what’re you doing?]

{Ugh... Again?!}

Deadpool lets go of the steering wheel and puts his hands in the air. The airbag breaks his nose as the car slams through the guard rails. That gorgeous wave of nausea as he hits freefall. Best. Roller coaster. Ever! “Off a briiidge!” he sings.

And, natch, the boxes gotta get one more word in before he hits the water: **[Dude. You said you aren’t suicidal anymore.]**

Wade grins. “I lied.”

He wakes up before the work crews have finished setting up the drag lines to fish him out, and swims quietly away, unseen. Wonders if the insurance is paid up on the car, then wonders if the car is even *his*. He thinks he might’ve borrowed it from Bob’s midlife crisis, but isn’t sure.

When he reaches the riverbank, he doesn’t leave the water right away. Instead he crouches mostly submerged with his nose just above the surface, scowling at the mud, contemplating the possible merits of tying himself to that broken toilet someone dumped over there and then throwing it into the deep parts.

{But we just crawled OUTTA the river.}

[We need a distraction.]

A few hours before he found Spidey doing a pretty good Harvey Dent cosplay, he’d gotten a voicemail from yet another rich divorcee being all butthurt about his ex shacking up with someone new. He’d totally written it off because, one, *boring*, and two, he was busy. Baby boy needed help.

{Baby boy thinks not-murder is better than murder.}

“Shut up.”

When Wade gets back to his crashpad and finds the phone safe and sound (not at the bottom of the Hudson with the BMW), he doesn’t actually know whether he’s glad to find an easy job so near to hand.

[Sure you are.]

He returns the call.

The job takes him to Jersey and back in less than six hours. The mark doesn’t see him coming and no one chases him away. The commute is the most interesting part, and by the time he gets in the shower he doesn’t really remember the commute.

{See? Boring.}

[Ten grand an hour ain’t half bad, though.]

{Ain’t half good, either.}

[Pish. Think of all the pizza we could buy Shortbus!]

{You HAD to bring him up again...}

Wade shoots himself as soon as he gets out of the shower. Right in the head. Bang.

He wakes up —

[Dude, just go visit Shortbus like you promised.]

{No! He's better off without you!}

[But Shortbus ALWAYS keeps his promises. He'll want us to do the same. He'll hate us if we don't.]

{If he hates us, he'll stay away from us.}

[Exactly! We can't let that happen!]

{No, dude, we WANT him to stay away from us.}

[What? No... no, we don't.]

— and shoots himself. Right in the head. Bang.

He wakes up *grouchy* and calls Weasel, because the boxes clearly won't change the fucking topic until Wade does *something* about the-spider-who-shall-not-be-named. The “something” he and the boxes eventually agree on turns out to be sending Weasel to sniff around the bomb components and try to trace them back to literally *anything* that could lead to answers.

{And by “answers” you really mean “live target we can take out our aggressions on and graphically punish for hurting Spidey”, right?}

“Duh.”

[Also because he'll love us if we help him stop these guys! Right? ...Right?]

“...Yeah. Sure he will.”

Weasel just sighs his way through the conversation and doesn't make any promises anyway. (Unless “Dude, I do tech, not intel” counts as a promise.)

Before hanging up, at the boxes' prompting, Wade puts in an order for whatever outrageously expensive eye-protection material all the cool kids are using these days, and seriously this shit better be able to survive a close-proximity nuclear warhead detonation, and if it isn't up to snuff then Weasel will look back on his time in The Box with misty-eyed nostalgia. (Weasel elects not to ask why Deadpool is asking for defense instead of offense.)

After two days, a courier hand-delivers the eyewear. Wade takes it to one of his warehouses and kills the afternoon hitting it with a sampler package of every type of projectile and incendiary there, including the fireworks. It holds up okay.

Day after that he still hasn't heard word one about the bomb stuff so he calls Weasel up again. Weasel tells him fourteen times to stop shouting, and then Weasel tells him that the reason he hasn't called back yet is he hasn't found shit yet. Only that the surviving components were all legal and could've come from anywhere from Lowe's to Amazon. All attempts to ID the bomber have failed so there's no trail to follow there, either. It's barely more than the cops know. It's probably

less than Google knows. It's not good enough.

{You'll never be good enough for him.}

[At least we got him those sweet new lenses?]

Weasel isn't even apologizing.

Maybe forty-five minutes later, Wade stops screaming long enough to notice that, while Weasel was smart enough not to hang up on him, at some point the little scrotum-sucker *did* just set the phone down and walk away.

[Only ever talking to the wall, huh, big guy?]

{There's some kind of broader metaphor here, I can feel it...}

Wade smashes most of his dishes across the floor and blows a hole through the bedroom wall with a little wad of Semtex before he slots the barrel of his Beretta up under his chin.

{Again? Dude, as much as we love your pain, this is getting old. Y'know you CAN stop feeling like shit about ditching Shortbus.}

[There's still a very simple solution.]

{And still time to do it.}

[Anyone else would've done it already.]

{You're overlooking the obvious.}

[Just don't forget the guac.]

Bang.

He wakes up and, too mopey to bother standing up, crabwalks through the shattered dishware over to the wall and leans his back against it.

{Unless you have a better idea, big guy.}

Wade sullenly picks pieces of dinnerplate out of his palms. "You were right the first time," he says. "I should stay away from him. Look at me. Look at this *place*." He jabs a thumb toward the new "window" in the bedroom wall.

{Your point being?}

"Don't be fuckin' dense! He doesn't need *this*!" Wade waves around at the smashed glass and dried brain matter and bits of wall all over the floor. "There's a *reason* I don't get to have nice things, and he's — he's the *best* thing. And yeah that's absolutely one of the gayest things I've ever said but I *don't even care*, that's how much I mean it. So yeah, you were right, I'm no good for that cinnamon roll, congratufuckinglations, your trophy's in the mail."

[But SHORTBUS!]

{I changed my mind for a reason, dumb@\$\$.}

[We wants him, precious!]

{‘Cause see, you’re clearly not gonna move on without seeing him again.}

[We LOVES him!]

{And you did promise him you would. Sure, WE can live with the self-hatred of letting Shortbus down, but we shouldn’t make Shortbus live with getting let down. Pretty sure that inflicting our presence on our poor hurt boy is the lesser evil this time.}

[He is OURS! Our precious!]

{Aaand it’s the only way we’re gonna ever get THIS idiot to shut the hell up about it.}

[...Ouch. It burns us.]

Here comes the headache. Wade knuckles his eye socket. The boxes can actually be helpful when he isn’t actively working against them, trying to shut them up. Which might be easier to do if they didn’t gang up on him so fucking much.

{Once again, big guy, say it with me — Shortbus believes in integrity. If we don’t go see him, he’ll notice... and he’ll CARE.}

Wade doesn’t voice agreement out loud, barely *thinks* it out loud. Just holds the understanding on the tip of his tongue and manages, for a while, not to bite down.

[And hey, it’s Tuesday. It’s Taco Tuesday! We HAVE to have Mexican with Shortbus! It’s the rules.]

“Says the turncoat who planted extra-crispy nightmares in my head every night for three weeks the first time I shared a bag of Doritos with him.”

[In my defense, we NEVER share food. I felt threatened. Vulnerable! A delicate flower! A fragile little butterfly—OW!]

{You’re welcome.}

[Taaaaco Tuuuuesdayyyy...]

“Wait, is it really Tuesday?”

{Hell if we know. You’ve been dead more often than not this chapter.}

[Just pretend.]

“Shit. What if it really is?” Wade pauses. “What if it’s not and I missed it? What if that totally fucks him up? He’s already trying to cram all this other crazier-than-usual shit into his weirdly specific world order, and if Taco Tuesday doesn’t happen, that’s just one more thing gonna fuck him up, and this time it’s my fault and... Mother pus bucket. I never needed to keep track of the days before...”

{Does that mean you’ll do it?}

[Told you we’d wear him down eventually.]

Wade sighs, and the sigh turns into a groan and he kicks his heels against the floor. “If I do,” he grits, “you gonna find something else to torture me about?”

{Oh, scout's honor.}

[Until you make our bae ANOTHER promise you don't intend to keep.]

When Wade grins, it's mainly force of habit. He bangs the back of his head against the wall a few times. Not too hard. Kinda the equivalent of giving the boxes a really, *really* rough pat on the back. “Why didn't you asslickers say so in the first place?” He gets up, grabs the Beretta he used on himself last time, checks the magazine. “Aight, let's get this over with and then resume our regularly scheduled psychological torture.”

{-sigh- Uh, that's the spirit... I guess...}

[Yay! Shortbus!]

[Is there a point to this, or is he just going through another suicidal phase?]

{Let's hope not. Physical self-destruction is getting boring.}

[Ok, but what about physical destruction in general? Where's the gunfire? Where are the car chases? The midair decapitations? The special-issue “versus” battles? The earth-shattering kaboom? There's supposed to be an earth-shattering kaboom!]

{This isn't that kind of medium. We don't need to look cool because we don't look like anything. No one will be able to see it if we do actiony stuff.}

[...But we're going to anyway, right? RIGHT?!]

{Patience, grasshopper.}

[This chapter sucks ballllls.]

Wade flattens himself against the wall and clings there, a captive fucking audience, until the gust dies down and he can move without getting literally blown away. It's not usually this windy. Not in this part of the world. Must be a tropical storm coming up the coast or some shit.

Had to be today.

“Am I having a stroke?” he says once his position is stabilized.

{Not that we know of.}

“Then might I remind you that you shit-eaters are the ones who talked me into this? In *literally* the last scene!”

{And you actually listened to us?}

[We've just been assuming you only came here due to some wacky coincidence.]

“Yeah, well, I didn't.”

[Why the hell did you wait until THIS to start listening to us?]

{Because he knew it was a bad idea and it's been more than ten minutes since the last time he indulged his masochistic side.}

“You assholes gonna shut up and let me do this?”

[Uh, how long have you known us?]

{Y'know, canon varies on that...}

[It was rhetorical.]

Wade bashes his head into one of the struts. “Hey! Geniuses! If you wanna avoid that suicide you were just bitching about, you might wanna stop distracting me for a minute here!”

[Where's the fun in that?]

*{%&@*ing up your \$#!& is the only thing that brightens our day anymore.}*

[Yeah man, this whole trying-to-be-a-good-guy thing is bull\$#!&. We're barely an antihero anymore. Our life's gotten so...]

{Protagonistic? Comparatively clean? Marketable?}

[Lame.]

“Rude! Also untrue. Also, y'know, it's called ‘character development’, ya feebs. Have you picked up even a single issue since Dan Way?”

{We don't have thumbs.}

The wind in Wade's ears isn't enough to drown them out. Stabbing through his eardrums with kebab skewers wouldn't work either, unless he stabs deep enough to pierce his brain, and even then that's more likely to stir-fry them than shut 'em up altogether. Blunt-force cranial trauma works sometimes, but he kinda needs his basic motor skills right now.

[So how long before he gives up?]

{Better question: how long before the hallucinations start? This scene is boring.}

“Too busy to hallucinate,” Wade grumbles. “And sneaking into Shellhead's ivory tower is way too easy to just give up. I've got my pride, y'know.”

{Pride? ...You positive you're not hallucinating there, chief?}

“Bastard.”

[It's 'cause you're bored, isn't it.]

{We don't have any jobs lined up anymore. It's this or daytime TV.}

“No! Well, yes. But also no! It's because of... of... all that stupid shit you said before. Tuesday, or integrity, or whatever.”

[Integrity's for people who don't own rocket launchers.]

“...You guys are really sending me some mixed signals lately.”

{Your decision-making process is our telenovela.}

Assholes. “So, would I be wrong—“

{Yes.}

[Always. Every time.]

“—if I said you jackasses don't know what the fuck you want? You talked me into this, and now you're tryin' to talk me out of it. Or make me fall.”

{Look, I've ALWAYS thought this whole Shortbus thing is gonna end badly for you, and probably for him too. Just because I gave you a push to come here doesn't mean I stopped believing that. Frankly I was just gettin' sick of moping or being DEAD all the time.}

[I'm pretty sure it'll end in tears or blood, too. I just don't care. I totally want Shortbus, that's all.]

The strength goes out of Wade's limbs for a minute. He pauses and braces himself against his equipment, rests his forehead against the glass. It cools his skin even through the fabric of his mask. His breath feels thick in his throat.

“So am I the only one,” he says at length, “even in my own FUCKING head, who *actually* gives a shit about whether or not he gets hurt?”

{Of course not. We just... disagree on what's probably good for him.}

[Everyone loves blowjobs!]

{I think he's shown some poor judgment, wanting to be around you.}

[Seconded.]

“Thirded,” says Wade. “But he seems to think otherwise. What the hell am I supposed to say against that?”

{Do you want the short list or the long?}

“Not what I mean. He can make his own fuckin' choices, and as much as I don't get what he sees in me, I'm not gonna insult his taste in friends. And, yeah, I'll take what I can get, okay. At least until the day comes he finds someone to hang out with who's less... uh...”

{Repulsive? Damaged? Sociopathic? Fuc—}

“Spare me the adjectives. Anyway he doesn't have anyone, so I'll just have to be that guy until he finds someone less... adjective. And then, y'know, I can bow out and skip off into the sunset and all that shit. Perfect plan.”

[Yeah, 'cause you're never a sore loser.]

{And your plans always bear out SO well.}

“And in the meantime I can just keep it in my pants.”

{Oh god. Oh my TAPDANCING christ, you are TOTALLY homo for him. And not just in the Tom of Finland way, either. You’d totally go with him to pick out a china pattern and adopt a french bulldog tomorrow if it were up to you. That’s what you’re REALLY hoping will happen here. Stop being a cockbite and just admit it.}

[Spidey and Deadpool, sittin’ in a tree...]

{It’s never gonna happen, you know.}

[He’s too good for you.]

{We established this.}

[Just because he’s enough of a \$&@#wit to spend time with you now doesn’t mean he will forever.]

{You’re basically just taking advantage of his stupidity.}

[It’d HAVE to be some poor broken sap with screwy wiring to actually WANT to waste time on a scabby scrotum like you.]

Wade can reach his D-Eagle from this position. He *knows* he can. “Leave him outta this.”

[Literally impossible. He’s the POINT of this.]

{If it were about ANYONE else, you would’ve bailed already.}

[Well, maybe Nate...]

{Please let’s not go there. Let’s not ride out another tedious depressive spiral on top of the one we’re already in.}

[Okay, fine. If this were about ALMOST anyone else, the big guy would be home scarfing enchiladas right now.]

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, fuckers.”

{Well, you do have a storied history of stabbed backs and broken promises.}

[Especially when it comes to friends and love interests.]

“I do not.”

{Are you really going to make us start citing examples by volume and issue number? Because we can.}

[And we will.]

“That won’t be necessary, brain, fuck you very much. Also, I don’t backstab love interests. At least not in any way that counts.”

[Excuse you, I thought the last official word on you and Shortbus was ‘friends’, and you TOTALLY backstab friends.]

{AND love interests, if it's unrequited or ambiguous.}

[It's part of our charm.]

*{No, it's part of the publisher's previous commitment to plausible deniability regarding the big guy's sexual orientation. Also the CCA's %&*ed-up "morals" or "family values" or whatever the hell they used to call homophobia.}*

[...Dude, I'm sorry, but you started using a whole lot of big words right when that one-legged pigeon started trying to have sex with its own reflection in the window there.]

{I wasn't even talking to you.}

[Who, then?]

{Ostensibly? To the big guy. But mostly to the readers.}

[All two of them?]

{Just... -sigh- Just be quiet and watch the crippled pigeon try to #&@% itself some more.}

"Y'know guys," says Wade, in the faux-conversational tone that typically precedes abrupt murder, "I get that you're noncorporeal and all, so it's *natural* and *healthy* that you'd be more concerned with the fourth wall and the amputee pigeon humping the window below us. But as the one with the limbs and the inner-ear fluid and the nerve endings, I feel like it's my duty to point out that *we are hanging off the side of a fucking skyscraper* so maybe it's time to *get your fucking heads in the game*, aight?!"

{Jesus. Fine.}

[Cranky, much?]

{He's just being a pissbaby because we still don't know whether any of this is gonna get us laid.}

[What, you mean with Shortbus? Is he really still ON that?]

{Hell, we don't even know if Shortbus is still HERE. He could've gone back to his apartment by now.}

[Without saying hi to us first? Such a rude little tard!]

Wade reanchors his climbing equipment and bashes his head against the building. Four, five, six times, and the boxes' letters are scrambled like a dyslexic's acid trip. "Don't *call* him that," Wade says for the *millionth* time, and for the first time since he started saying it, the boxes are too fucked up to respond with something even worse.

They try, of course, but only succeed in changing their battered letters into all caps and a few crooked strings of random punctuation symbols.

"You guys know you're not actually swearing when you do that, right?" says Wade. "That buttonmash bullshit is what happens when a cat chases a laser pointer across a keyboard. You just look illiterate."

He scales the next eight floors accompanied only by the wind in his ears and his personal, NC-17 rendition of "Mamma Mia". Which, for his purposes, is as close to silence as he ever wants to get,

and as close to peace as he ever can get with a pulse.

{S407dA... dRk.}

Okay well... it was nice while it lasted.

“Say what?”

There’s a pause, while the box pulls itself together like a Don Hertzfeldt stick figure. Wade climbs, and uses the box’s (hilarious!) struggle to distract himself from his own.

{Should’ve waited for dark.}

Wade pauses.

[That would’ve required smarts.]

“Oh, so we’re all back online. The whole family’s together for Christmas. Hooray.”

[He has no smarts where Shortbus is concerned. That’s basically canon.]

Wade holds the side of his head threateningly against the windowpane until the uppity narrative device backs off, whimpering.

{He’s got a point, big guy. This kid’s a big fat blind spot. Case in point: us, here, dangling off Stark %ing Tower in broad daylight. We should’ve at least waited for nighttime, is all we’re saying. We’re kinda exposed here.}

[You do kinda look like a Garfield stuck in a car window.]

“Shut up. I do not.”

{Dude. You have giant suction cups stuck to your hands and feet.}

[Been sourcing your kit from the Acme catalog again?]

Wade looks over his shoulder and down the twenty-odd stories he’s aced so far. “It’s working, ain’t it?!”

{Giant. Suction cups.}

“If James Bond could use giant suction cups and still look good...”

{First of all, Bond could wear a dead opossum as a hat and make it look good. Second... did Bond ever actually do the giant-suction-cup wall climb?}

[Or was that Secret Squirrel?]

“You guys got anything helpful to add to this scene or are you just here to distract me?”

{The latter.}

Wade freezes. “Distracting me,” he says, slowly, “from *what?*”

[Oh, look! Here comes Hawkeye! Wave to him! Wave hi!]

Wade slams his forehead against the window. “I fucking hate you.”

[We know you mean love.]

“No,” says Wade, as the first arrow severs his left thoracic nerve and the entire arm goes dead.

“No, I definitely mean hate.”

*{You just HAD to play Rapunzel or Romeo or Sleeping \$%&*ing Beauty or whoever the hell else is stupid enough to climb towers to get to a love interest who’s too clueless to even KNOW they’re a love interest.}*

[Sorry, but the princess is in another castle.]

{Every \$#@ing time.}*

“Not. Helping.”

[Aw, poor stupid baby.]

{So, so stupid.}

Wade turns away (snapping his vertebrae out of place again) and spits a few molars onto the asphalt. He hates it when the boxes heal first. Even his vision’s not really back yet, everything all dim and muzzy. He’s pretty sure it’s nighttime though.

Ah hell. Does that mean he totally missed Taco Tuesday? Petey’s up there all alone in that goddamn Tower, with those goddamn Avengers who clearly make Spidey feel even *more* lonely, and Wade promised him just *one damn thing* to make Petey feel better about it all and couldn’t even deliver on...

{Holy crap. You got it BAD.}

[And what’s Shortbus ever done for US, hm?]

“The fuck?” says Wade.

{Oh, you mean BESIDES listen to us, talk to us, say things like “thank you” and “sorry”—}

[Like we deserve that anyway—]

{—help us stop murder-monkeys, understand our jokes, LAUGH at our jokes, tell us MORE jokes, carry our severed arm for us when our other hand’s full, never barf on us—}

[Good aim’s just one of his superpowers—]

{—stop us on the street JUST to say hi, miss us when we’re outta town, get upset and worry about us when we miss Taco Tuesday—}

[OKAY, FINE. But I still haven’t forgotten the takeout. It’s not like he’s puttin’ out, so why do WE always gotta pay for dinner?]

{Give Shortbus a break, he’s as broke as a Mormon grandma’s brain at Folsom. How about the time he felt guilty and brought us a two-liter of Mountain Dew?}

[Oh, you mean the time he shook a bottle of soda by swinging to the meetup and it barfed foam all over us?]

{Had we, or had we not, always wanted to go to a foam party?}

[There wasn't enough of it.]

{I think it's safe to say we had fun anyway. Besides, he apologized. How many people do that?}

“Guys.”

{{What?}}

“What was that?”

[What was what?]

“That thing that just flew by.”

{Oh, you mean the thing that looked suspiciously like Spidey in civvies?}

“Yeah,” Wade grunts, levering himself up off the ground with his elbows. “That.” He checks himself; the hole in his chest closed up shop a while ago, and the feeling’s mostly back on in his legs. Good to go. Tin Man was even nice enough to leave him with his swords, if not his guns.

[So... am I the only one gonna ask why Spidey wasn't in his suit?]

Wade’s already trailing after Petey at a tired jog and doesn’t bother answering. The webbing strands that Spidey leaves behind are, like actual spider strands, annoyingly tricky to spot unless the light hits ‘em just right, but Wade’s been sneaking up on the guy two or three nights a week for longer than he could admit out loud without having to cough to cover up his embarrassment, so practice is on his side.

[He’s moving kinda funny tonight...]

Box-bro is right. The trail’s erratic, the strands unevenly dispersed. Very un-Petey-like.

{\$/!&, looks like he almost fell into traffic there. That web’s WAY too low...}

Wade’s jogging is a little more... brisk, now. The boxes are a little less talky, a little more tense-waiting-keeping-an-eye-peeled. The bad signs are piling up fast.

He’s close enough to hear the explosion, and beelines for it. Isn’t long before he’s running upstream against all the civilians trying to GTFO. Around the corner, and there’s one of those fake-marble buildings that banks used to like to build themselves for their corporate headquarters, the kind with cookie-cutter gargoyles and non-load-bearing pillars and all that other tasteless bullshit. And pretty close to the middle of the building is a big ol’ hole with fire slurping around the edges and twirling bits of paper floating out on the wind. Wade pulls to a stop and looks around.

{I don’t see Spidey. Or any more web-trails.}

[Hey, check it out. Up there.]

Well well. Shellhead himself is joining the party. Iron Man farts straight across the sky and into the broken building. Like he expects to find something specific in there.

“Seems like suspiciously good timing, wouldn’t ya say?” asks Wade.

{Him, or us?}

A massive burst of sparks and the sound of collapsing glass from inside the building as the fire keeps doing its thing in there.

[Should we help him?]

“Who, Tin Man?” Wade sucks the inside of his cheek in thought and absently rubs a palm over his chest, over the giant circle of skin exposed since Stark ruined yet another of Deadpool’s suits by *blasting a hole clean through him* earlier today. “Nah,” he decides.

The air’s really thick with that extra-toxic, burning-building smell now.

[So... why are we still here, then? Why aren’t we at home covering the couch with more stains that can only be seen with blacklight?]

“The answer to your first question is *shaddap*.”

{He doesn’t know why.}

“Oh, as if you do.”

{Not for sure, but I have a pretty good idea.}

Wade reaches for a sidearm out of habit, a comfort-seeking gesture, but when his hand closes on empty air things just feel even more off. “There’s something sideways about this, guys...”

He feels it before he hears it, and then hears it only as an echo — the Hulk, the mothershitfuckinggoddamn *Hulk*, soaring past, screaming at the top of his *considerable* lungs, and starting to rip the burning building apart chunk by chunk with his giant creepy Hulk-hands.

Before the ringing in Wade’s ears can stop or he can make any sense of why two of the Avengers’ heavyweights are both losing their marbles over what looks, at worst, like a small bombing at a boring, empty building... Wade’s already sprinting — full-out Seabiscuit *galloping* — toward the place, urgently, without quite knowing why.

{But we have a pretty good idea.}

[Run, Forrest, run!]

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter's a stunted, twisty little thing, but JFC Deadpool is hard to write sometimes. JFC the goddamn BOXES. The asshats fought me literally every sentence along the way and would. Not. Stay. Consistent. Imagine trying to convince a swarm of drunk hornets to perform a complex, synchronized flight maneuver they've never heard of, using only your powers of calm verbal reasoning and only speaking in Latin. If I failed, if this is irredeemably OOC or absolutely incoherent... please just be gentle in pointing it out, and the obsessive part of me will come back later and try to fix it.

Next chapter: Not a cliffhanger.

Going Fetal

Chapter Summary

In which the social paradigm begins to shift, Peter doesn't remember high school English very well (and Wade doesn't remember it at all), and the author doesn't know shit about medical injuries of this extent.

Chapter warnings: None really, except that partway through, the author had to stop taking his regular meds so that he could take The Good Painkillers™, because he had an ouchie (he's ok, though, no worries) and The Good Painkillers™ don't mix well with his usual meds, and between that and then suddenly switching *back* to his regular meds maaay have gotten him pretty fucked up for a while (in a fun way!) so he literally doesn't even know if this chapter makes sense, but he don't care right now so he gonna post it anyways and just kinda... hope for the best.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter's aware enough to know that he's weaving in and out of consciousness. It's like one of those nightmares that just keeps picking up where it left off every time you manage to wake up for a minute.

If you're also running a high-grade fever at the time.

He's done it before.

The noise of his environment follows him in and out of sleep, a constant meaningless roar. It's the kind of noise that tells him he's emphatically *not* in a safe place. Maybe mid-battle, who knows. It's dark. There's fire. He needs to get up.

He needs to get up.

Peter reaches out to that thought and hangs onto it, rides it like a life ring after a shipwreck. It doesn't bring him to shore, though. He can't stay awake.

...Iron Man is lifting something off of him. When the weight comes off his legs it's like it releases the pain, and the pain lunges straight for Peter's head and knocks him back under.

...Cap (not Steve, but Cap) is leaning low over Peter's face, saying something that's probably urgent. Peter can kinda-sorta feel him clinically and quickly palming Peter's body all over, and Peter is offended by this in the vaguest possible way, and is also resigned to it because he knows Cap's just checking for broken bones.

Cap's face drops off the map of Peter's peripheral vision and Bruce's face replaces it, shining a penlight in his eyes. Asking Peter a muffled question. Cap's searching hands reach Peter's lower leg and the blackout is instant and aggressive.

...Someone is carrying him, he can't tell who. His eyes barely open this time — whoever's got him must be moving fast — he's getting jostled a lot, and it keeps him flinching. He can't smell the

person's body because all he can smell is *burning* and *burned*, and he feels like he's gonna be sick... but if he does end up puking, it must happen after he passes out again, or he's too far gone to feel it happening.

...He's on the ground with one leg propped up, and it's *cold* and when he starts shivering it upsets his leg, and that brings out the screaming. (Not actually screaming, Peter realizes belatedly — his mouth won't open and his lungs are taut with smoke inhalation but he can hear himself kinda *groaning* like a sick horse.) The fire-truck siren feels like a grappling hook scraping through his ears, and it brings him fully around, leaves his ears ringing so shrill... He squints up, because that's the direction his face is already pointing.

"Hi, Wade," he tries to say, but his mouth still isn't opening.

Wade is completely ignoring Peter's boundaries, is way too close, but Peter can feel a heavy hand pressed to one of his legs with a steady pressure that Peter recognizes as *stop the bleeding*, so he doesn't protest. He can hear Wade talking and it's a low-pitched, kinda frantic hum. The words "Spidey" and "baby boy" keep rising to the surface of the sound.

Other voices are happening somewhere just outside his field of vision. Probably the Avengers. Man, are they going to be pissed.

He doesn't quite pass out again, but he does sort of lose track of what's going on, because next thing he knows Wade is standing over him — literally over him, one foot on either side of Peter's hips — with back muscles flared out and hands knuckling the air around his empty holsters. Peter blinks at the holsters. The only time he's ever seen them empty is when the guns are in Wade's hands, but Wade's hands are as empty as the holsters and that's *wrong*.

Someone is yelling from very close by. Tony, he thinks. The language is a nonsense stream of garbage-syllables, but for once in his damn life, going semi-nonverbal leaves Peter completely unruffled. He isn't interested in anything Tony would have to say, anyway.

Wade's voice gets loud in response to Tony's. Peter's ears are busted up pretty bad so Wade's loudness doesn't hurt this time. And most of the time Peter's not a fan of other people's anger — it tends to goad him into fight-or-flight, to flip his switch to Spider-Man autopilot — but right now, Wade's anger feels... like a marker of sanctuary? A big strong thing that Peter and Wade can both lean against, that'll protect them both.

The swords are out in the open air, hovering above Peter but pointed at someone else. Peter's mouth doesn't want to smile any more than it wants to open, but then, Peter and his body disagree about a lot of things.

"...ran," says Tony's voice.

The swords shift to a striking position. "*Why?*" says Wade. He sounds even angrier than before. Peter wants to reach up and pet Wade's head in appreciation, the same way you thank a cat when it purrs for you. But Peter's still on the ground, on his back, and Wade's too tall to reach.

He loses track of things again while they argue. The inner edges of Wade's boots bracketing his hips feels pretty good.

Bruce touches Peter's head, and Peter flinches — even though he can tell it's just fingertips it still feels *sharp*. Bruce says something, and although the words don't *feel* like words inside Peter's brain, the basic meaning of them still translates in loose terms: Bruce thinks Peter's head hurts, and thinks that's a big problem.

He pulls open Peter's eyelid with a gentle thumb, and Peter manages to swat him away in annoyance. Might even manage to say the word "no," although it's possible he dreamed that part.

(Peter notices that one of the sword-tips is resting on Bruce's shoulder now, nudging against his neck.)

Bruce says something along the lines of Peter needing to *not* be lying on the cold ground anymore. Peter silently but heartily agrees. Bruce goes on to say a lot of other things about what Peter needs, but the information flows too fast for Peter to hold onto any of it.

After a while, Wade puts his swords away, and Peter doesn't feel boots against his hips anymore.

Cap reappears, apologizes in advance, and hoists Peter up by the armpits. Too fast. The sudden wave of dizziness slamming through his head distracts Peter from the grabbing-hands feeling. He manages to set his feet on the ground, but before he can test out whether they'll hold his weight, Cap sweeps him up completely. And says something about Peter not weighing enough.

Rude.

He glances over to the spot where he thinks Wade was standing (everything's still spinning, and spatial layout is *really* not on speaking terms with him right now) but Wade isn't there. As Cap starts walking, Peter twists to try and spot Wade. And he can twist *pretty damn far*. Cap tightens his grip and says something under his breath ("Language," says Tony's voice) but has to stop walking for a minute while Peter thrashes around the best that he can.

"Wade," says Peter.

While they debate about whether he'd said "Wade" or "wait," Peter internally preens about the fact that he got a word out at all. And look! The panda mask is coming back. Wade'll get Cap to put him down. Peter can *totally* walk.

Wade is shaking his head, and muttering something unhappy, and rocking foot to foot. Not yelling at Cap at all.

Unhappy head-shaking? ...This is not the correct behavior. Peter tilts his head.

Wade is apologizing to him. Before Peter can figure out how to ask what the apology is for, Wade is turning and walking one way, and Cap is walking the other way — still with a firm grip on Peter — Tony and Bruce walking alongside and muttering to each other.

Peter scowls and blinks a lot and looks over Cap's shoulder at Wade's back, which is getting smaller with distance.

...Waitasec.

(Details slot together.)

Just wait one shitfucking minute!

Gritting his teeth because he *knows* this is going to rattle his hurt leg, Peter fires a messy glob of web at Cap's face and bucks with everything he's got. Cap staggers back and is nice enough to drop Peter kind of gently (but *fucking OW* nonetheless) before clawing at the webbing with both hands. Tony rolls his eyes before coming to help Cap, and Bruce starts quietly counting, and Peter tries to call for Wade again but only manages to force out a loud, shapeless bellow.

As he scrapes himself across the ground with his palms to try and get some distance from the Avengers, a tiny blue spark draws his eye back to Cap. To Tony lasering open a hole in the webbing, and Cap gasping in a massive breath, then another. Big desperate *I almost asphyxiated* breaths.

Peter's jaw falls open. He didn't mean to web over Cap's nose *and* mouth. He didn't *mean* to—!

Tony turns to stare at Peter, and Peter has *no idea* what that expression means, he has *never* seen that before, but he thinks he might throw up again.

Wade skids to a rough stop between them, blocking the view with his back. "...THE FUCK," says Wade, among a lot of other noise.

When Tony answers, though, he doesn't yell. Not this time. Tony's actually really quiet, but that doesn't mean he's calm, either.

Pretty soon Wade stops yelling, too. Peter shivers on the ground because his leg hurts too much to climb a wall, and he doesn't have any other ideas of what to do.

But when Wade pivots to look down at him, Peter's arms get the brilliant idea of reaching out for Wade.

(It occurs to Peter that he probably has a pretty big concussion after all.)

Wade crouches, *way* inside Peter's personal bubble, and readily fills Peter's stupid reaching arms, and lets Peter's stupid hands pick and grab at the red-and-black. "What's going on?" asks Wade, and Peter almost sobs because the words parse *perfectly*.

Translation in the other direction doesn't go so smoothly.

When Peter tries to speak it just comes out as more groans and frustrated whimpers, and his hands clutch harder. ("It's okay, Spidey, you got this. I won't stop listening until you get your say, okay?") Peter drops his head in gratitude, then tries to let go of Wade's suit, because he thinks his signing might still be operational and he kinda needs his hands for that.

His fingers open their grip, but stick to the material. And he can't get them to release.

Usually his hands only involuntarily stick when he would otherwise, you know, fall to his doom. It's a stress reflex, like Spidey-sense, or like people peeing themselves when they're scared.

Peter blushes as viciously as though he *had* peed himself.

Snorting at himself, he gives his hands a ferocious little shake, like a cat with scotch tape on its paws. And okay, maybe he panics just that little bit harder when they still don't let go.

Wade slowly takes one of Peter's hands in both of his and worries at it with warm gloves and gentle words until it peels away.

Peter stares blankly at his freed hand, until the soft sound of Bruce covering his own mouth and inhaling deeply through his nose gets Peter to look up at the three Avengers. He scowls, turns abruptly back to Wade. *Not going!* he says, shaking his head so hard he gets the spins again.

You need a doctor, says Wade. "Even more than before," he adds out loud.

Peter just shakes his head.

“You’re *fucked up*, Spidey, okay, you look like every character at the end of *RoboCop* and it’s gross. We already had this same argument two chapters ago, and no new solutions have conveniently opened up in the meantime. I really don’t see that there’s much choice here—“

NOT. GOING.

For some reason, Wade pauses this time, head canted. After a hasty glance at the supers he leans even closer, as if there’s a risk of being overheard when he hesitantly signs, *You’re afraid to go back?*

Peter looks down and licks away some of the blood from his nose, stalling while he figures out how to answer... which proves to be answer enough. He still has one hand stuck on Wade’s arm so he can feel it when the muscles tense up. Slowly — and he can feel the faint but building tremors of rage that Wade is keeping hidden inside his skin — Wade works on disengaging Peter’s other hand. “What happened,” says Wade.

Peter’s brain runs through gestures for “elevator”, “attack”, “leash”, and a host of other misleading concepts until he settles on one that kind of works. His syntax is scrambled and he knows it, but Wade kinda speaks Spider-Man. He’ll understand. He has to.

Oh god he *has* to.

Close door, Peter says. *Close door close door [head-shake] close door.*

Wade puzzles for a second, then signs a little question mark.

Close door! Peter says. *Close door, team, close door. [violently] CLOSE door! Me!*

Wade squints.

With scrambling desperation Peter searches for a different concept, almost stumbles right past the correct one in his haste to be understood. *Lock*, he adds.

Wade’s starting to have a hard time controlling his breathing now. His nose is very loud. *Lock, out?* he asks. *Or lock in?*

In. In, in, in, lock in lock! [metal, man] Not going!

Slowly, Wade backs out of range while Peter repeats *not going* to himself because the motion is kind of soothing and gives him something to focus on besides the mounting pain in his legs and back. “You did what now?” Wade says to Tony. He stands up. “*Oh no she din’t.*”

Cap looks at Tony, too. “You did something?” he asks — and Peter’s not sure if he’s glad that he can understand words again because they’re going to argue and he can’t... right now, he can’t...

Captain America plants himself between Tony and the slowly advancing Wade, who stops, but only just, and (probably) only because he worships Cap... although if the direction his swords are pointing is any indication, he might be looking to convert soon.

“Iron Man,” says Cap. “What did you do?”

Tony looks from one to the other, and then when he looks at Peter he gets that *face* again and Peter has to cover his eye to block it out. “I didn’t mean it like that!” Tony says, to Peter. “Kid, c’mon, I just wanted to keep an eye on you!”

“Punny,” Wade says, sounding less amused than he has ever sounded before. Peter looks at one of Wade’s pouches, the one with the broken snap.

“I didn’t mean it like *that*,” Tony tries again, still talking to Peter.

“How in the sweet sriracha *did* you mean it then?!”

“Didn’t mean *what* like that?” asks Cap.

In the prickly silence, it’s Bruce who ends up finally answering: “Tony tried to lock him in.” Then he starts shuffling away. “I’m sorry, I just... should *really* remove myself from this situation...”

“No wait, doc, c’mon back,” Wade says, deadpan. “You and me never team up.”

Wisely, Tony closes his faceplate.

“You tried to *what*?” says Cap. “He’s our *ally*, Stark! And you understand that it’s illegal, right? And beyond disrespectful? And *absolutely unethical*?”

“Says the guy who used to get off on licking SHIELD’s boots.”

“Nice deflection. You can’t just—”

“I didn’t—“

“Jesus, Tony, no wonder he doesn’t want to come back!”

“Yeah I *got* that now Capslock, thanks for the tweet!”

“And we thought *I* was bad for him,” Wade mutters under his breath.

“I’ll deal with *you* later,” Cap tells Tony. Then, to Wade: “And I’ll *personally* see to it that nothing like that happens again.”

“Just the same, El Capitan, in light of all this fresh shiny sterling bullshit, I’d prefer to see to it *myself*. Maybe without Barton’s help this time?”

Tony starts to protest against Wade Fucking Wilson coming anywhere near *his building* until Cap turns, and stares him down, and... Tony’s voice dies an ungraceful death.

Cap turns on his heel and bends to help Peter up again.

Spidey-sense sparks up Peter’s nervous system and with a yowl that he only half-hears he cringes away — not just a flinch, but a full-body, twisted-spine *cringe*, and *fuck* that hurts the shit out of his back — and when his vision clears, his web-shooter is aimed square at Cap’s face again. Hasn’t fired, but the target is clear.

No one was expecting that kind of response. Not even Peter.

For a few seconds, no one moves.

Then Cap straightens up, and holds up *I surrender* hands, and backs off... and *then* Peter stiffly untwists his body.

Team, Peter signs to Wade, shaking his head.

“Looks like he doesn’t wanna go with you, either, Captain Spanglepants,” says Wade. “Any of you.”

Peter nods, staring resolutely at the ground. He doesn’t have to look up to know that Steve (not Cap) is making his Sad Face, which if anything is an even *more* devastating variation on the Disappointed Face. “Spider-Man...”

No. Peter screws his eye shut and shakes his head. No no no.

And with one eye shut, and absently fingering the patch over the other one, Peter is more than happy to contemptuously ignore the astonishing weight of the silence around him, and to pretend that everything is normal and no one is staring at him or silently communicating with other people about him as if he weren’t here. It’s just Peter and the hard ground and that right there is the entire universe.

“Okay,” Steve says after a while, and he sounds tired enough to lie down on the pavement near Peter and go to sleep. “But where should—“

“He can come with me,” Wade says. Peter glances up.

Steve gives Deadpool an unimpressed look.

“What? My place is safe. Ish. And I can totally take care of him.”

“Do you honestly think that’s the best—“

“Look, he clearly established before that he can’t go back to his own place, and even if he could, someone would have to go with him because *holy jalapeño* would you *look* at him.”

“He can’t be alone right now,” Tony mutters, standing off to one side and not looking at anybody.

Wade gestures an obvious *See? Even that jackass knows*.

Steve waffles in confused silence.

“*Wade*,” says Peter, pointedly, while glaring right at Steve. Right at him. Right in the eye. Fuck that painful squirming in his stomach and the muffled screaming in his hindbrain — *right in the fucking eye*.

Steve squints, then looks away.

(Did... did puny Peter Parker just outstare Captain *America*?)

(...After almost accidentally suffocating him?)

While Peter blinks about that mindfuck, Wade goes into *Drive A Hard Bargain* mode, the same one Peter’s borne witness to on the three or four occasions when a teamup or burrito night got interrupted by one of Wade’s work calls.

In the end, it’s decided that Peter’s going back to Wade’s place, Bruce is joining them for exactly as long as it takes to make sure Peter’s injuries are properly addressed, and Tony’s obviously going to dispatch drones all around the place despite being forced to promise otherwise.

“Fuckin’ Stark. I hate apartment hunting,” Wade grumbles as he lifts Peter off the ground. “You know how hard it is to find a place without a credit score or social security number? Doesn’t even matter how much cash you wave under their noses...” he pauses and, before Peter can flinch about

it, picks something out of Peter's hair, a bit of debris or a tick or — a *tracking device*?! — and drops it to the ground as soon as understanding registers on Peter's face, grinding it under his boot. "...*Nobody* will rent to you," continues Wade, momentarily putting a finger to his lips. "It's like there's some kinda *law* about real estate or somethin'. Fuckin' Stark ruins everything."

Peter is starting to shiver, with anger as much as the pain. They put a *tracker* on him? Is that why Tony didn't make JARVIS lock the window?

Wade's arms increase the pressure around his body, just slightly, and when Peter scowls up at the panda-mask Wade shakes his head faintly. "Whatevs, first things first," says Wade, a little louder, looking straight at him. "Let's get your busted ass patched up. Again. We can worry about *location* stuff later, as much as it makes me wanna renege on even *pretending* to be a white hat."

Oh. Peter nods, and Bruce obliviously calls for an Uber.

This driver tries to divert them to the hospital, but Wade uses his Scary Deadpool voice to convince him otherwise.

The driver yammers in a high-pitched voice about football for the entire rest of the ride. Maybe he feels weird about the skinny guy bleeding all over his back seat (even if most of the blood is getting on Wade instead, who keeps Peter curled mostly in his lap rather than let him touch the seat itself). Or maybe the driver's just confused by the combined spectacle of beat-to-shit Peter, fully armed Deadpool, and very hassled and sweaty but normal-seeming Bruce Banner who keeps trying to bring the tension down a few notches. (Peter does not envy him the task.)

The bouncing of the car rattles Peter's pain receptors so hard it doesn't even feel like pain, just, like...

Oh dear...

He squints his eye open. He's drifting in and out again and... oh god *owww*...

The rhythm of the bouncing and rattling changes.

An odd sound from somewhere below him — like gravel? But staccato? Peter looks blearily down but can't see much other than that they're in Wade's place (the lighting has a very particular feel). "Floor wasn't crunchy before," he says.

"I redecorated," says Wade.

"That blood wasn't there before," Peter says, pointing at the couch before Wade lowers him onto it.

"Cheaper than reupholstering it," says Wade. "Here, you can help. Only not too much. You need your blood more than my furniture does."

"That hole in the wall," says Peter. "Def not there before."

"You're telling it wrong," says Wade. "This is the part where you tell me what big teeth I have."

Peter tries to smile but, again, his mouth isn't listening to him.

"Hey, Spidey. Where's the smartass comeback? Spidey!"

Too tired for smartassery.

“C’mon, you’ve already done enough passing out tonight, baby boy. Hey! Hey, I’m *talking* to you! You don’t gotta look at me if you don’t want to but it’d be nice if you at least showed some signs of consciousness!”

“Here,” says Bruce’s voice, and something *sharp* lands on Peter’s forehead.

He gasps and opens his eye. No, not sharp. Cold. Very cold. Unconsciously he raises a hand to it, and Bruce presses that hand down onto the cold thing. “Hold that there,” says Bruce.

“Holy shit *ow!*” says Peter, as the cold-sharp-cold bites into his palm. *Ice*, says his brain. Peter decides that he hates ice.

“*That’ll* keep you awake for a while,” Bruce mutters, smirking to himself. (Behind Bruce’s back, Wade pulls back a fist to punch him, then thinks better of it at the last second, and pretends to scratch the back of his head when Bruce turns around.)

Peter grins at Wade, who laughs way, way too loud in response. “It’s nice that you feel comfortable enough to keep passing out in my company,” he says, “but I’m starting to think you’re just trying to avoid conversation. Just say so, man, I can take it.”

“Your place is filthy,” Peter mumbles.

“Your mom didn’t seem to mind it.”

“Mom is dead.”

“...Uh. Okaaaay, apropos of nothing...”

“‘Apropos of nothing,’ title of your sex tape.”

“There he is.” Wade smiles, and even through the panda-mask Peter can tell it’s big and genuine. “Good to have you back again, baby boy, though maybe next time you can visit in one piece, eh?”

Bruce clears his throat and gestures for Wade to move.

Wade is considerably less pleased to have Bananer as a guest.

He looms at the edge of the kitchen, out of Bruce’s way but still in a good tactical position where he can gargyle over both Peter and most of the apartment. He keeps his arms folded and scowls while Bruce goes back and forth between the bathroom and the couch, collecting water, rearranging furniture for an easier setup, laying out medical kit, kicking trash out of the way.

“Is this being filmed for HGTV or something?” says Wade. “You’re sure taking some liberties with my place here, doc. Usually only crazy girlfriends get to cramp my style this hard. If you wanna play house with me that bad, though, I guess I’m game, but maybe we could take it a little slower? Try some foreplay first? A single date at least? May I offer you a *refreshment*? How ‘bout a nice Hawaiian Punch?”

Bruce pauses exactly once, to give Wade a very performative smile and say, “I’m not here to do *you* any favors. The Other Guy is already knocking at the door, so unless you want to be personally responsible for introducing *him* to an enclosed space with Spider-Man right now, I strongly recommend you reconsider your priorities. And please, if you’ve ever been curious to see what it feels like to *shut up* for a few minutes, now would be a good time.”

Peter snickers to himself before the spiking pain in his back forces him to stop. They both glance

over at him before Bruce finishes his setup and starts assessing Peter's damage in detail and doing what he can about it.

Wade leans against the wall, arms crossed pretty tight around his chest, and glowers over the proceedings. Just about every time Peter winces or sucks in air through his teeth or makes a noise, Wade stiffens and starts forward a few inches like he's going to yank Bruce away by the collar. But he catches himself in time, every time. And except for some under-the-breath singing, and the occasional animal noise in answer to Peter's grunts of pain, he stays quiet, about his living space and everything else.

There's nothing for him to really complain about, though. Bruce's bedside manner is still the absolute *best*. Peter would never insult Bruce by suggesting that he should've been a GP — Bananer loves experimental physics maybe almost as much as Peter loves photographing birds on 35mm and processing the film and enlarging the prints in an actual darkroom — but seriously, Bruce should be an EMT or first responder at *least*. It's criminal that he's not.

Final tally — which Bruce disclaimers with the usual not-that-kind-of-doctor — moderate concussion; dislocated ribs (that's the back pain) that are also bruised, but the bruising seems old so it's probably leftovers from the first explosion; a probably-incomplete-fracture in his left tibia; some generally horrifying shredding of the skin on both his lower legs but mostly the left; a motley collection of abrasions, bruises, and punctures where Bruce had to remove bits of glass, metal, or wood; a kind of ridiculous number of *oh my god you got SO LUCKY* burns, mostly first-degree, which, seriously, how *did* he get so lucky with that? The now-trashed sweats he was wearing weren't exactly flame retardant.

“So basically,” Bruce concludes after catching his breath, “you're really, incredibly, *stupidly* lucky, and based on what I know about your healing, you should bounce back in maybe three weeks, four tops. As long as you take care of yourself, and don't get another infection. Which means,” and here he turns and looks at Wade, “a clean environment. So either swab the decks or get him to someplace fit for human habitation.”

“Says the guy whose interior design model is ‘developing-nations chic’.”

“Glass houses, Deadpool.”

“Worst design choice of them all, for serious. Any old jackoff wandering by would be able to get an eyeful of your modesty!”

Bruce sighs through his nose. “Can I talk to you over here for a second?” He drags Wade around the corner into the hallway, and lowers his voice, but not low enough. Even people who know Peter forget about the enhanced hearing. And his ears were pretty sensitive before the bite, too.

The inner-ear damage from the blast finished healing during the awkward Uber ride, so at least that one part of Peter is operating at full capacity. He looks blankly at the hole in the bedroom wall while he listens.

“It wasn't the infection,” Bruce is saying. “His body should've been able to fight that off, no problem. His eye should be completely healed by now and it's *not*, it's maybe 75% of the way there. Two years ago he would've bounced back from that in three days at the *most*. Those older burns should've cleared up completely a couple days ago, too. But it's still a wreck and I have some concerns about that, okay?”

Wade, who never forgets about Peter's enhanced hearing because he runs up against it all the time trying to get the drop on Spidey, hisses something back too quiet for Peter to hear.

“No, of course not,” says Bruce. “And I’ll bring more antibiotics over first thing. But that’s not the issue here.”

More hissing, and the sound of metal scraping out of a leather sheath, and a brief pause.

“Don’t be counterproductive,” Bruce says. “My *point*, if you’ll let me make it, is he hasn’t been eating enough.”

“*[incoherent grumbling]* thing I don’t know,” says Wade.

“And not just some short-term hard times, either,” says Bruce. “We’re talking long-term malnutrition. I saw enough of it in India. His whole immune system is compromised while he’s like this. His body’s locked in famine mode and it’s going to take time to get him out of it. You want him to get better, first of all you need to scrub this place with a damn *toothbrush*, and more than that you need to get food in him. Several times a day, *every* day. *Real* food, not the kind of garbage you have piling up over there. Food that *doesn’t* come out of a wrapper. That’s what’s going to help get him back on track.”

Wade grumbles something, and the metal gets re-sheathed with a sharp pop.

“If that’s what it takes,” Bruce grumbles back. “But I’m sending you the bill.” He comes back around the corner, eyeing the walls in disgust. “If they’re smart, they’ll charge hazard pay.”

(“Remember what we talked about?” Bruce says to Peter just before leaving. “When you asked for the crossword? This whole mess... It’s at *that point* now. You should’ve let us help before. We won’t try to take the whole thing out of your hands, but you’re not doing this on your own anymore. You need to understand that.”)

“We don’t even know if this is connected to the other bombings,” says Peter, but Bruce just hums flatly and locks the door before closing it behind him.)

“They lojacked me,” Peter says as soon as he can’t hear footsteps anymore.

“You should get some sleep, Petey,” says Wade.

“No. Why couldn’t we talk about it in front of Bruce?”

“Because I’m pretty sure he ain’t the type, which makes me think he didn’t have anything to do with it, and if Tin Man saw fit to keep it from him in the first place, I didn’t think you and me should be the ones to spill the beans. He already Hulked out once tonight. Not sure what his refractory period is like but it didn’t really seem worth the risk if you ask me.”

“Tony...” Peter mutters. “The hell. You microchip a *dog*, not a person.”

“He’ll get what’s comin’ to him,” Wade says, and Peter believes him. “As much as I hate to ruin a good ’n’ miserable stormcloud with a silver lining, though, he did manage to get to you really fuckin’ fast.”

“So then how’d *you* find me so fast?”

Wade grins. “Guess I have my own kind of Spidey-sense,” he says. “For real, get some sleep. I’ll uh... make the bed less toxic so you don’t have to uh... ‘cause the couch is basically a Maxi pad right now and that’s not the comfiest-coziest *cleanest* accommodation I could aaaand you’re already asleep.”

Not quite yet — he's awake enough to hear Wade say that, anyway — but he's too asleep to do anything about it.

He's also still awake enough to feel a blanket drape over him, and to hear Wade shuffle around for a while, muttering absently to himself like ducks do when they're looking for breadcrumbs. Then there's the sound of plastic broom-bristles on wood floor (*Wade owns a broom*, Peter thinks, and chuckles too faintly to upset his ribs) and the scrape and clink of... broken glass?... sliding across the wood, gathering in piles. And Wade, muttering to himself or the boxes, singing "The Man Who Sold the World" very, very softly.

In his sleep, Peter can sort of feel time passing. Every few hours his consciousness starts to resurface, then before fully waking, it pauses, and seems to look to him, questioning.

No, Peter decides, *stay asleep a little longer. Waking up will hurt*. And his consciousness sinks back down, obedient, carrying with it the sound of Wade singing a different Bowie song each time.

Eventually he can't put it off waking up any longer, and blinkingly he realizes he's been staring up at the dark ceiling with a wide-open eye for who even knows how long. The room smells like bleach.

Feeling bold, he works on sitting up. It takes a few false starts and a lot of labored breathing but he gets there, sort of, and then props himself at a 45-degree angle against the backrest to recover from the effort.

Wade is similarly propped up in the duct-tape-and-corduroy armchair with his mask still on, head tilted back and hands dangling over the armrests. Peter looks at him a while. Figures it's only fair; Wade's had all this opportunity to watch *him* sleep, and if the direction his sleeping head is angled in is any indication, then he definitely took advantage of that opportunity.

There's a cliché somewhere about people looking smaller when they sleep, but Wade looks bigger. Too big. Too awkwardly huge for the armchair, or the yellow-handled broom lying on the floor over there, or the voice that, last time Peter heard it, was singing "China Girl" pretty much on key. As just a *shape occupying space*, though, Wade Wilson is more than a little intimidating.

The blood on his gloves is almost definitely Peter's.

Selfishly, Peter wishes Wade would wake up and go back to normal size and stop being creepy. But Wade deserves some sleep too, so Peter lets him be and resolutely looks away instead. ("Any shadow will seem to move if you look at it long enough," Uncle Ben said the night he took Peter's nightlight away. "Best not to look, then, Peter.")

Peter should have to pee by now, he's sure of it. But he doesn't, which means he's dehydrated. And it's taking pretty much everything he's got just to keep sitting up against the back of the couch... Getting up and walking to the kitchen sink is out of the question.

He glances at Wade again.

No, don't be a jerk. Let him sleep. You've been enough trouble for him already.

What he remembers of tonight (or last night? probably last night) comes back to him in broken waves, each one shoving his head a little farther down into the dark place.

...The picture comes into focus, and when it does, he facepalms.

He facepalms against what is apparently a gigantic bruise on his cheekbone, which makes him wince and hiss and want to facepalm all over again.

So, recap: He broke out of Tony's attempt at *protective custody* or whatever the hell *that* was supposed to be, and first thing he did was blindly follow his Spidey-sense GPS (old habits die hard, and they always kick in strongest when you're scared), straight into a situation he was in no way prepared for. And got hurt. Again.

And needed to be rescued and looked after.

Again.

Peter decides he's not a chipping sparrow. He's a hummingbird. Too light, too breakable, a *legend* of inefficiency. Always just a few minutes away from starving to death. Barely making it from one pit stop to the next.

A long, low growl starts up in one corner of his stomach, and rolls slowly around to the other side, like thunder across an extra-broad sky.

"My Peapod's not getting here for like nine more hours," says Wade, "but if you're okay with eating the usual junk even though Greenie said not to, I can nuke something for ya."

Peter stares. "You're awake."

"So I am. So are you. So what?"

"You don't sound hoarse, or tired, or anything."

"Why would I?"

"I mean you... How long have you been awake?"

Wade arches himself half out of the chair and stretches all four limbs at once. Despite spreading out so far, the motion paradoxically seems to shrink him back down to regular size, breaking the creepy-giant-sleeping-Deadpool spell, and something in Peter's stomach unknots. "Not sure I ever did go to sleep," Wade says.

Peter can feel himself making a face. "You really should."

Wade shrugs. "Maybe I was keeping an eye on you."

Yes, because as Peter has so clearly demonstrated tonight (or probably last night), it's necessary. Evidently. Licking one of his canines, Peter looks down.

"Hey," says Wade.

He grunts, and doesn't look up.

"How do you feel about pizza rolls?"

Blech. "Okay."

Peter's studying the huge scrapes on his palms (already turning into dark purple scab-gardens) but he can feel Wade lean in closer. "Are you lying?" says Wade.

"M not picky," Peter mumbles.

“Yes you are.”

Don't want to be, he thinks.

“Petey?”

Peter strongly considers lying back down.

“Petey.”

“Hmm.”

“Pancakes?”

“Pancakes,” he repeats numbly.

He watches Wade go through his own kitchen cupboards as if lost. Most of the dishes Peter remembers from last time are gone. Once Wade gets situated, though, the kitchen-ish banging-clanging all sounds the same as before. Peter files the noises under *Food Will Happen Soon*, and almost immediately their loudness transmutes from intrusive to reassuring.

At some point Wade puts a sweating jelly jar of clean water onto the tipped-over fridge, near Peter's hand, and goes back to the kitchen again. Peter hurts his shoulder grabbing for it, and gulps it in two swallows, and doesn't overlook Wade watching him do so from the corner of an eye.

Other smells start to crowd out the bleach-smell. Wade put cinnamon in the batter. Gorgeous.

“The body's not secure,” Wade sings. “The truth will not absolve. And this crumbling apart is no good for you at all. Sound, there's order in the sound, the sound that you don't know.”

“Albatross,” says Peter.

“Gesundheit.”

“Spider-Man. He's an albatross,” says Peter.

“Aren't those like the size of a boat, though? You're itty-bitsy.”

“So he can cover a lot of distance and is actually really strong, but he can't always get going, and landing is a *disaster*, and he's awkward and not put together right and his limbs are too long and he falls flat on his *face* and just so we're *extra clear*, the poetic allusion is also very much intended.”

Wade puzzles at the ceiling for a few seconds. Flips a pancake. Puzzles some more. “I have some counterarguments,” he says, “but I'mma hold onto those for now because you really lost me when poetry entered the picture.”

“The albatross? *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*?”

Wade shakes his head, blankly.

“Didn't you go to high school ever?”

“Probably,” he says with a shrug. “I have a hard enough time remembering what happened last Wednesday, though, so I don't think I must've done too well on tests.”

“It's this old poem that everyone hates,” says Peter. “It's kind of a ghost story and definitely in the

horror genre, so you'd think it would be cooler, but no. It's basically a crazy old dude crashing some other dude's wedding to talk about all the hallucinations he had when he was a sailor. Their boat got lost in a storm and an albatross leads them out of it, but then the guy shoots it for no reason, and then he has to wear its corpse like a necklace for the rest of the poem while everyone around him dies or goes insane because of what he did."

"He has to *wear* it? Dude, that's metal."

Peter headtilts. "Actually, kinda, yeah. Except the poem is *really* long and doesn't make sense."

"I resemble that remark!"

"You — oh. Never mind, I get it now."

"Wait, so... Spidey's a *dead* albatross?"

"No I mean — the dead albatross in the poem is supposed to be a symbol for your fuckups that you can't escape from—"

"But why *can't* the dude escape from it? It's just a dead fuckin' bird! Just drop it on the ground, man, this parrot is no more. Also, why a dead bird? Why not a dead ex-wife or a dead tax attorney? Why not a red letter 'A'?"

"I don't know! That's just what my English teacher told us!"

"No wonder people bitch about the American education system."

Peter huffs and presses a palm to his ribs. "Anyway that's not the point," he grumbles.

"No duh, but the point you were actually going for is stupid, so I chose to ignore it."

...Pause. For a few seconds Peter isn't sure he heard correctly. He double-checks, replays the sounds in his head, re-translates the sounds-into-words-into-meaning. Initial assessment: confirmed. But he isn't sure he believes it. "*Excuse* me?" he says.

"Don't get yer tighty-whities in a knot, Pete," Wade says, low-pitched and offhand. "I didn't say *you* were stupid."

"Then what *were* you—"

"In what universe does being Spider-Man count as a fuckup?"

"Are you kidding?" Peter looks down at his many, many injuries, and at the couch he can't currently get up off of without assistance. "You *are* kidding, right? Spider-Man is basically one giant, unending fuckup in tights. *Being* that big a fuckup is kinda self-evidently a fuckup in itself."

"You didn't answer my question, you just kinda rephrased it to sound mean. Also I think your logic chip might've gotten cracked or something, it's running in circles."

"It's—" He goes to tug at his web-shooter, but all that's on his wrist right now is some bandaging. He picks at the edges of it, reluctantly. Bad texture. And there's this one abrasion (or burn — he can't tell the difference without seeing it) at the top of his back, kind of on his shoulders, that burns worse than a lot of the others and makes all the rest of his skin feel overheated and crawly. Peter rolls his head around his shoulders, like he could rub the nasty feeling off against thin air. "I just think sometimes maybe I might agree with them," he says, snappishly, barely hearing his own

words over the sound of his skin throwing a temper tantrum.

“Agree with who? Who’s ‘them’?” A beat. “What, you mean Earth’s Mightiest Hypocrites?”

“Earth’s High-And-Mightiest,” Peter grumbles, digging fingernails into a sudden prickly spot on his scalp.

“About what?”

“Huh? What about what?”

Peter’s eye catches the swift whirl of a spatula getting flung against the backsplash. It’s rubber, though, and hits the tile quietly.

“Oh my *gawwwd*, you’re *killin’* me, Smalls!” Wade’s wailing. “Please don’t make *me* be the person keeping track of the conversation. That will *not* end well.”

“Just one time then, please.”

“You were talking about being an albatross, and your ‘why’ apparently boils down to you agreeing with the Avengers about something, and I’m asking what you agree with them about.”

“Oh.” Peter tries to shrug, but even though he’s only going for one of those single-shoulder half-shrugs, it still makes like nine different body parts all scream in pain. It’s making it... difficult to focus. “Nothing they ever really put into so many words, I guess,” he says. “Just kind of a... pattern? Basically I think that *they* think there shouldn’t be a Spider-Man at all. Or that there should, but he shouldn’t be *me*. Or that I’m okay to do cute little stuff like purse snatchers and the kinds of villains that pretty much defeat themselves — and I’m *totally cool* with doing that stuff because it still needs to be done and no one else seems interested in filling that awkward niche between cops and supers, and if no one else will then I’m pretty much—“

“Petey.”

“...Right. I mean. You know. They think that outside of the petty stuff, Spider-Man needs babysitting or whatever. That he’s a perfectly serviceable mascot or something, but not really worth having around for big stuff. At which point if he *does* get involved, he’s just. Less of an asset and more like. Like. Like maybe even a liability.”

He gives it a minute but Wade doesn’t say anything, so Peter forces out a noise that, upon reconsideration, doesn’t sound anything like a laugh after all, and he says, “Besides, I kinda like the ridiculous size disparity between an albatross and a hummingbird.”

“Hummingbird? I thought you were a swallow. You went from a swallow to a hummer? Isn’t it s’posed to go the other way around? Hey-o!”

“Sparrow, not swallow.”

“Eh, wishful thinking, then.”

“I changed my mind.”

“When did that happen?”

“Right after I woke up.”

“Just now?”

“Mm.”

Wade turns the stove off, then leans against the counter with his arms folded, studying Peter with his head tilted sideways. “Nah,” he says at length. “Hummingbirds are glam. You’re too boy-next-door cute to mess with glittery eyeshadow. And Spidey, you are *way* too totally badass to be the pituitary giant of the seagull world.”

“You’re not giving albatross enough credit.”

“*You’re* not giving enough credit to what I’ve been tryin’ to *say* here, Spider-Pete.” And he comes forward a few steps to give his arms more room to wave around and aggressively punctuate his next words: “The Avengers. Are. Pimple-sucking. Horseshit. Okay? If their heads are jammed that tight up their — and if they could just *put down* their flaming swords of self-righteous speechwriting and lay off trying to face-fuck the *mirror* for long enough to — just to stop for one muppet-fucking *minute* and — and can we *please* take a minute to appreciate the fact that they fuckin’ *lojacked* you?!”

“Oh *now* you want to talk about it.”

“Yes! Yes I think now would be the *perfect* fucking time, seein’ as you’re currently hellbent on letting *their* shit-slurping opinions fuck you up in the head about how awesome you actually are! *Clearly* they are not as infallible as some of us maybe previously might’ve secretly thought...” He turns, kicks the trash can over (Peter jumps a little, and, ow), then grabs the stack of cinnamon-steaming pancakes like he’s about to drop-kick them off a roof.

Instead he brings them over and drops them the regular way onto the fridge-table. (They’re on what looks like an entire package of paper plates. He must really not have any dishes left.) “Here,” Wade grumps, stabbing a bent fork down into the middle of the stack like a very grouchy kid planting the flag on top of a sand castle that he didn’t even want to build. “Together breakfast.”

“It’s nighttime.”

“Not the point.” And he drops himself down on the other end of the couch, and produces a TV remote from between the cushions without having to dig around to find it first, and clicks it at the screen with the exact same kind of concentration he normally uses to pull triggers. “My brain’s tired,” he says. “No more serious. Pancakes and *Steven Universe* only.”

“What’s *Steven Universe*?” says Peter.

Wade spins as if Peter burned him and leans much, much too close to Peter’s face. (Peter doesn’t flinch away — holds his position and scowls right back, challenging.) Wade’s breath makes the air move against the bridge of Peter’s nose. And his eyes widen so much Peter can almost see star-shapes in them, before he *very earnestly* whispers, “Oh, baby boy. *Prepare to be heartbroken.*”

By episode two, Peter is beginning to understand Wade’s warning.

By the time they introduce Lapis, Wade has to move from the couch to the floor because he keeps squealing and flailing and sobbing and accidentally smacking Peter in the process. The big tough scary merc wraps himself fetally around a pillow, and whines wordlessly at the screen until Peter puts an experimental hand on his shoulder, and that works to keep him quiet, so Peter leaves it there.

When Steven finds *that video tape*, Peter has to lie back down, and obligingly pets Wade’s head

while they *both* sob shamelessly.

After that it's pretty much nonstop blubbing from both of them, just at varying volume levels depending on the episode, until a tiny bit into season two, when Peter notices that it's just him having reactions now. Leaning forward (okay *ow*, that motion pulls his skin and tendons apart in sixteen different ways) he blinks owlshly at Wade's sleeping face.

Good manners say to turn off the TV so he doesn't leave Wade behind on episodes, but... given the way that Wade would involuntarily keel at the beginning of every episode that turned out to be even more emotional than the others, it's obvious he's already seen them all...

And also, the direction the show is suddenly taking with Peridot's character development is giving Peter significant feels that he *cannot just walk away from*.

He finishes out what exists of season two so far, chokes on his breath a few times, manages to turn off the TV, and passes out while mentally outlining the Autistic!Peridot fanfic he is *totally* going to write because *oh my god*.

Peter wakes up in the daytime, still lying on the couch, with Wade still sitting on the floor, and their heads slack on each other's shoulders. Neither the proximity nor the contact immediately alarm Peter.

And that... nope, still doesn't alarm Peter.

Which confuses him, but — that's just drops in the ocean, lately.

Sometimes you need to figure out how to *just enjoy* something, no matter how confusing it is.

And truth to tell, it's *not* hard, figuring out how to enjoy *this* — the rise and fall of Wade's sleeping breath under Peter's head, the texture of his shirt against Peter's face and the scent of it, all these things anchored and solid — and Peter's brain calmly taking them as given, cataloging the details with a smooth and practiced hand, painless, steady as she goes.

For twenty minutes Peter simply enjoys having his head on Wade's shoulder and Wade's head on his, and he tries to remember whether he's felt this particular... *thing* before. This smoothness in his brain, and the sprawling calmness in his chest, and the crystal-sharp focus behind his eyes. It's like the *anti*-Spidey-sense.

The closest approximation he can remember is when he was learning his way around his very first DSLR. Eight, ten, twelve hours a day at first, methodically searching out the particulars of feature and function, testing each one against his (literal and figurative) eye. Running his fingertips over this or that component, drinking in the textures, making and remaking minute adjustments to the neck strap until it was *exactly right*, opening up the battery compartment and smelling it, setting off the flash directly in his eyes at point-blank over and over until all he could see was something that looked like the sun floating in front of him.

He still has that camera. He *loves* that camera.

He wants to shoot Wade with that camera. He wants an image of the light diffusing through Wade's ear. Every kind of light. From every possible angle. Thousands of pictures.

He wants to fill an entire memory card with shots of Wade's chin and mouth — for such a long time, the only unmasked part of him that Peter knew — laughing, frowning, snarling, sticking his

tongue out, full of taco meat, forming the shapes of words, closed in thought, muttering sharp comebacks to the boxes, making exaggerated air-kisses at Peter after doing something vile, grinning like a fox with a mouthful of shit.

(Wade will never hold still long enough for Peter to take all the pictures that he suddenly requires. That's okay. Peter thinks candid shots are the only ones that make sense anyway.)

Wade sneers a little and finally opens his eyes. "Take a picture, it'll last longer," he says.

Peter never gets to explain why he's laughing, because by the time he stops, he's got debilitating hiccups and his face and diaphragm (and *ribs*, holy shit) ache too much to talk.

Wade reaches up with a confused smile and knuckles away the laughter-tears from the corner of Peter's eye. Evidently without forethought, because right away he jerks his hand back and starts to stutter and apologize —

Peter cuts him off by gracelessly butting his head against the meat of Wade's shoulder, like an awkward cat who isn't quite sure how to be a cat, and sitting up experimentally. Yes, he can probably walk now. He gets off the couch, painstakingly (but successfully!), to begin a slow limp toward the bathroom.

Wade stands up. "Peter."

"It's okay this time," says Peter.

"But I should've—"

"Don't worry about it."

Wade pauses. "Why—"

"I don't know," says Peter.

"It just is?"

"Pretty much."

Wade scratches the back of his head. "...Ssso is this gonna be, like, *permanent* at all, or is it—"

"I don't know that either," says Peter, and limps on, because he *really* has to pee.

He studiously avoids the mirror. He already knows he must look terrible, and injuries always hurt worse after you know what they look like.

When he comes out of the bathroom, still wiping his hands on his hoodie because they *never* seem to feel dry after he washes them, Wade asks, "Can I hug you?"

Peter considers. "Right now?"

"Yeah. Right now." Wade's face changes color, and he pretends to wipe dirt off his arm. "Or later, if later's better. I can call back if I've caught you at a bad time. I'll take a rain check. We'll do lunch. If nothing else we'll see each other at Thanksgiving. We'll always have Paris..."

"Right now's good."

"...And then there's always the office Christmas party so — wait what? Really?!"

Peter headtilts. “Pretty sure,” he says. *Before I lose my nerve, please.* “Yeah, I think so. Just... dislocated ribs, okay?”

“Totally.”

(And Peter *knows* he should be making an “It’s been a while, please be gentle” joke, but the immediacy of What’s About To Happen is actually much too terrifying, and there’s not enough room inside him for even a weak-ass wisecrack like that.)

Wade is *very* gentle.

Wade is basically just a weightless layer of too-warm body heat and too-saturated scent draping around him, about as restrictive and threatening as tissue paper, or birthday-candle smoke.

Peter thinks he might be able to manage a wisecrack about the way Wade is kinda trembling a little. But it’s a good thing he holds his tongue, because a second later he realizes *he’s* the one shaking.

He can feel Wade’s thumb rubbing up and down one little spot on his back as if his entire nervous system has it under a damn microscope. And Peter mentally watches it with the same focus he’d bring to bear on an actual microscope. First it’s just... strange.

Then it’s... kinda good? Maybe?

Definitely.

Until it’s very much *not*, holy shit. “Okay *ow*,” he says, even though “ow” isn’t exactly *accurate*, and Wade is suddenly four feet away, spewing apologies that Peter doesn’t want to hear.

“It’s fine,” says Peter.

“No I shouldn’t I don’t know what did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything,” says Peter. (*Also* not exactly accurate, but it’d take too long to suss out and explain.)

“We did *not* break him!” Wade snaps.

“No,” agrees Peter. “Shut up, boxes.”

Wade shuts up instead, then looks around like he lost something really important, then grins broad and white and sort of giggles to himself. “Cooool,” he says.

“Did...” Peter drags a fingernail across a bandage. “Did they actually shut up?”

Wade smiles even brighter and nods.

Peter makes a small, wondering noise. “Cool.”

“Can I hug you again later?”

“Probably,” Peter answers before even thinking properly about it. Between his sudden inexplicable ability to pause the boxes, and the weird feeling spreading out from that one little spot on his back, there isn’t much attention to spare for a lot of proper *thought*.

“No, I mean for real,” says Wade.

“So do I,” says Peter. “It seems likely. Don’t know when, though.”

“Don’t care! Good enough for me! That’s — oh sweet jingle bells I need to piss like a clydesdale holy fuuuck not cool!” He sprints down the hall, and before the bathroom door slams he sings out, “This is still so much better than another goddamn cliffhanger, though!”

Peter has no idea what that’s supposed to mean, but, again — drops in the ocean.

Chapter End Notes

HUUUUGS. :3 Well that there’s some progress.

Is this what you wanted? I hope this is what you wanted. This is what *I* wanted, for sure.

It’s kind of a shame they both lack the attention span to give *Ancient Mariner* a proper read. It’s really not very long. And heavy religious overtones notwithstanding, it could be, like, the non-musical theme song for each one’s personal angst.

Oh, and speaking of songs, [this here is the one](#) that Wade was singing in the kitchen. (SFW, but beware sudden volume changes.)

Next chapter: More fluff, liberally salted with angst.

The Medication is Wearing Off

Chapter Summary

In which Peter gets showered in various forms of fluff, recovering from injuries does not leave much room for dignity, and the author doesn't know shit about portraying the passage of time in a meaningful or elegant way.

Chapter warnings: Prescription drug use (for its intended purpose, but there are still descriptions of strong opiate side effects), illegal surveillance, negative self-talk, descriptions of abusive friendship, and not exactly a cliffhanger but you will all probably HATE me at the end

Chapter Notes

Look! [This beautiful person](#) drew [this beautiful thing](#) of Deadpool and Autisite! Peter and this is me hanging it on the refrigerator so everyone can admire it! :D

EDIT: Now with ILLUSTRATION, omg people I love you. *weeps*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I know you stole this," says Peter, but he's *really* fucked up from all the pain, so who cares about the way his accusation gets drowned out by the sound of him frantically ripping the cap off the bottle of painkillers, and ripping the childproof threads off right along with it.

"Because you so clearly give a shit," Wade snickers as Peter dry-swallows twice the recommended dosage. "Anyway I didn't get it from a hospital, I just ripped off a skeezy-ass CVS, so, y'know, those can double as chill pills."

"I'm pretty sure they would do that anyway," Peter says, eyeing the label. "I've had this kind before. If I can stay awake I'm gonna get real goofy."

"Goofier than when you eat too much?"

"Significantly."

"Well *now* I'm lookin' forward to it."

Oh dear. "You're going to fuck with me, aren't you."

"Count on it."

Peter tries to sigh, but the breath makes his ribs move too much and the sigh gets cut off with a grunt. "As long as this shit makes my body stop *screaming*, I don't even care," he says. "Thank you."

"Hot damn, Mr. Ethical over here is *thanking* me for knockin' over a pharmacy. You must really

be hurting.”

Peter levels a Look at him. “I got *blown up*, Wade. I can feel pretty much every last fucking molecule in my body, but I can’t tell what order they go in because they’re all on *fucking fire*.”

“Huh.” Wade flips through the phone book he’s got spread open on the fridge-table, fiddling with the mobile in his other hand. “You carry it well, anyway,” he says without looking up.

“That’s a weird compliment.”

“You’re welcome.”

Peter looks at one of the other pill bottles standing amid the tiny pill-bottle forest on the table, then reaches out and tips it over, like the defeated king at the end of a chess game. “Other stuff’s too mild,” he says, watching the tipped bottle roll onto the floor and stay there, probably to be ignored until Wade moves out and the building gets bulldozed.

“Mild is so not what you want right now. Clearly this calls for extra spicy,” Wade agrees.

“I think Bananer underestimated how much I’d need.”

“Yeah, *because* you carry it well. That’s what I’m saying here. Y’know when I pulled that piece of plastic out your eyeball you only screamed for like a second, and then you just looked grumpy. Most people would be rolling on the ground screaming so hard they collapse their lungs, so, yeah. Squeaky wheel gets the grease, Spidey, y’know?”

“Way to blame the victim.”

Wade throws the phone at him. “Stop *playing* the victim. No one here feels sorry for you, dude. You’re totally just faking all those injuries to get attention.”

“Ah, same way you apply your scars with makeup every day?”

“Exactly the same,” Wade says with a grin. “Can’t grift a grifter, dude. I mean, I will give it to you, yours looks more *likely* than mine, but mine gets me tons of elbow-room on the train, so I’m winning.” He reaches for the phone he just threw, making a grabby-hand in the air. “Gimme that back, I need it. I wanna call someone out here to fix the hot water.”

“Ten bucks,” says Peter.

“Excuse you?”

“You did kind of throw it at me. You want it back, I demand restitution. Ten bucks.”

“Ten?! Oh come *on*. Man, I got *five kids* to feed!”

“Ooo. For the flawless *Total Recall* reference, I’ll knock it down to eight.”

“Eight? Screwww youuu.”

Peter snorts. “And for the inelegant double-reference, the new price is twenty.”

“‘Inelegant’? Fuck off, I totally made that work.”

“Nope.”

“Know what, your standards are too rigid. You gotta *open your miiiind*.”

“Ugh. You’re clearly in a spiral here, Wade. Give it up.”

“No,” says Wade, and sticks his tongue out. “No one can ever over-quote the best movie Schwarzenegger ever did.”

“Please,” Peter snorts. “It’s barely in the top five.”

“Oh *hell* no you did *not* just say that. You can kick that shit right down the road!” Wade’s gearing up to make a grab for the phone, and Peter’s possessively wrapping himself around it as much as his injuries will allow, but before the undoubtedly disastrous and ill-advised battle can ensue, a knocking at the door interrupts negotiations.

Peter’s first thought is *Fuck, it’s SHIELD!* because who else *knocks on the door* in a location like this?

Wade seems to have some additional suspects in mind, though, and after unceremoniously shoving the couch, with Peter still on it, a bit farther out of the potential line of fire, he creeps to the door with weapon in one hand and rolling down the panda-mask with the other. “No one’s home,” he calls in his Scary Deadpool voice.

The knock is rather insistent.

Peter straps on a webshooter over a bandage (yeah, okay, so he carries at least one webshooter with him from room to room, go ahead, you can call him paranoid) and aims his arm across the back of the couch, keeping as low and invisible as possible. Wade motions for him to duck back all the way, which Peter steadfastly ignores.

Wade drags a hand down his face at that, and whispers something to the ceiling in Spanish, before calling through the door, “I didn’t order no fuckin’ calzones.”

This time the person on the other side of the door says something back.

Wade scowls. “The fuck?” he says, and opens the door just enough to stick the business-end of his gun through.

“Oh whoa whoa whoa hey man okay!” says the person on the other side. “Alright, it’s cool, it’s no thing, but uh... I’mma get in trouble if I don’t get a signature—“

“Forge it,” says Wade.

“Right. Bye.”

Wade slams the door and leans against it, banging the side of his head against the frame in a slow grouchy rhythm. He stays there until Peter’s ears catch a heavy-sounding truck engine rev to life and move away from the building.

“Stay there,” says Wade after the truck’s gone. “Stay *right the fuck there*, Pete. If I’m not back in like forty-five seconds, GTFO.” He slips outside and hustles to shut the door behind him, like someone trying to keep a dog from getting through.

Peter counts to thirty-seven before Wade strolls back in, casual as Aunt May at lunchtime, with a couple of cardboard boxes. Their top flaps are open already. “It’s for you,” says Wade, “and it’s not a bomb.” He puts the boxes on the fridge-table before dragging the couch back to more or less

its starting position (with one hand, like it weighs nothing even with Peter on it).

“You opened my mail?” says Peter. “Federal offense.”

“Technically it’s not addressed to you, so good luck pushing that case through.” Wade taps the ripped shipping label dangling from the loose box flap. Peter leans in. It’s addressed to *Birdwatcher c/o Bigmouth*.

Wade takes the phone and saunters off down the hall, stretching his shoulders all casual-like, but his boots are extra clompy and he doesn’t make an exit joke, so something’s not right.

Peter stares after him for a minute. But there’s insufficient data to form a hypothesis about the weird behavior, and his leg’s hurting too bad for him to get up and follow Wade and just *ask* him what the hell, so he puts the mystery aside as much as he can. For now.

“You’ve got mail,” he says in his best AOL voice.

The smaller box is mostly a well curated collection of medical supplies that all seem fairly relevant to the kinds of injuries he has. Awesome. Creepy, but awesome. The plastic splint is a particularly good idea, since Bruce didn’t have anything on hand to offer in the way of stabilizing the break and told Peter to just stay off the leg for a couple weeks. (He’s totally not swallowing any of those pills or touching any of the topical burn-treatment goop until he knows exactly who sent this, though.)

On top of all the stuff in the second box is the newest model of StarkPad, the one that hasn’t even hit the market yet but the bloggers are already screaming about. It’s swaddled in bubble-wrap but no other packaging. When Peter angles the gadget against the light, he can see a few faint fingerprints around the edges of the screen that didn’t get wiped off all the way.

There’s also a huge wadded pile of... Spider-Man suits.

“Who the *what* now?”

New ones. Five or six brand new pristine Spidey suits with masks and gloves and everything. And they all have funny textures, and most of them have subtle design alterations that Peter is *not* okay with, and two of them have *control panels*, which, what.

Between the folds of one of the suits is a piece of Stark Industries letterhead. The handwriting (in red Sharpie) is slanted and frantic and Peter has to squint and second-guess before he can decipher it.

Prototypes. I got bored. They’ve been sitting around a while. Figured you’d find some use for them

“Huh,” says Peter. Which is about as articulate as he can get about... whatever this is supposed to be.

Then, at the bottom of the box, he finds a hefty trade paperback. *The Mammoth Book of Prison Breaks: True Stories of Incredible Escapes*.

The inside front cover is also scribbled with red marker.

OK, so

I’m terrible at apologies

At least it’s not a fruit basket? Pepper said no fruit basket

I can still get you a fruit basket if you want

— *T.*

Peter flips the pages in front of his nose, because new-book smell, then drops it back into the box and sits for a while in a bit of a trance while his brain kicks all of his emotions outside to play.

At some point, Wade comes back into the room. “Nice swag,” he says in a low pitch.

“It appears to be Tony’s attempt at an apology,” says Peter.

“Buying his way back into your good graces? That’s crass.”

“You would totally do something similar and you know it.”

“Probably.”

Peter really does not understand why the following silence is so tense, and that’s aggravating because if he doesn’t know the source how’s he supposed to *fix* it?

Wade puts a finger against the inside edge of a box and looks mildly down on its contents. “So? Does this kind of thing work on you?” he asks. “Just for future reference.”

“I’m... not actually sure,” says Peter. “I like the fact that he’s making an effort, I guess. I think giving someone stuff to apologize is supposed to prove you really mean it, because you’re kinda making a sacrifice and why would you do that if you didn’t mean it. But for Tony, spending money isn’t a sacrifice, it’s more like a reflex. So I dunno.”

Wade grunts. “What about the suits.”

He picks at his webshooter. It’s too tight around the bandaging and starting to cut off the circulation in his hand and he should really take it off, but it feels too good, having it there to tug on. “I really don’t know,” he says at length. “Like, I *guess* it’s kinda flattering that I was one of Tony’s projects at one point? Kinda? Maybe? But it’s *Tony* so it could mean he was trying to be practical, or it could mean he was making a weird attempt to express his weird emotions, or it could mean he just had insomnia one weekend. Either way it’s just kinda what he *does*, so I know that on his end of things it doesn’t look weird. But... I don’t really like the idea of being *anyone*’s ‘project’. Especially if they’re gonna mess with my look.” He laughs a little, low and nervous. “I feel a little violated, honestly.”

Wade shuffles and starts to back away. “Oh. So... okay. Okay I should...”

“Wade...? What’re you doing?”

“Nothing never mind—“

“So then what’s that thing you’re failing to hide behind your back, there?”

“Thing what thing?” Wade looks down over his shoulder. “Hm? Oh. That thing. Yeah. Well. See. I told you that I’d — and you were gettin’ locked in the Tower all princess-style but I didn’t know that yet so I had some time to — uh. I got you these.” And he pulls the thing out from behind his back and holds it out, awkwardly.

At first Peter isn’t sure what he’s looking at. Some kind of weirdly curved plastic sculpture? Like oversized, super-reflective sunglasses or — “Wade! You got me lenses?”

“Yeah, y’know, it wasn’t, like, a *big deal* or anything, I just called up my guy, just like—“

Peter forces himself to stop flapping long enough to take them and hold them up against his face. “Wow, good clarity,” he says, looking around. He rubs his thumb-pad across surface and edge to test the texture (“Nice,”) and breathes on them (“Ooo, anti-fog!”) and bounces them around between his hands. “Little heavier than the old ones.”

“Yeah, these’ll actually give you some, y’know, protection, so they’re gonna be heftier...”

“No no, it’s good! It’s a good thing!”

“...Already playtested them, so they should hold up against pretty much anything that the rest of you could possibly survive... but I mean, I’m sure Stark’s are at least as good and probably have computers and X-ray vision and stuff and are already, y’know, inside masks—“

“Wade, shut up. I love them.”

“But if people screwin’ with your Spidey-swag is no good for you, then...”

“You aren’t screwing with my stuff. These are awesome.”

“But I wasn’t trying to—“

“I know. Wade, *thank you*.”

“But if Stark—“

“What about him?”

“If... if you feel weird about other people shoving their own ideas about your superheroing gear at you—“

“Am I some kind of project to you?”

The words fall out fast, and bring them both to a staggering halt.

“Sphincter says what?” says Wade.

“It’s not the gear, okay,” says Peter. Then he side-eyes one of the control panels. “Well. Mostly,” he admits. “With Tony there’s always a grab-bag of possible motivations to consider, but no matter what those motivations were, these—“ Peter handwaves the suits “—are still just the results of a *project*. So, are these—“ he holds up the lenses “—also part of a project? And me being here? And every burrito night ever? Am I your project?”

“Holy *shit*, Pete. I don’t even — why would you — on this week’s episode of Oh Hell The Fuck No—“

“Then why would you even think that you’re doing the same thing Tony did?” Peter swipes a hand through his hair, then pulls on it. “You and Tony aren’t even in the same category. Like, Tony’s trying, but he doesn’t *get it* and this is probably the best he can do, and the context is all *different* and my relationship with him isn’t the same and... And your lenses aren’t even an apology gift. And you didn’t just, like, dig them out of storage and throw them at me, y’know?”

Wade turns a little bit to the side and picks up what sounds like an intense line of muttering with the boxes.

Peter’s hands and feet start to tingle. It’s not Spidey-sense, it’s the first sign the painkillers have made their way into his bloodstream. He watches the sensation spread up his limbs and work at the

knots in his back muscles. First the high, then the pain fades. He knows the drill. The second part never happens fast enough.

“Heh. Too real, bro,” Wade says, and, returning to the present moment, he pulls off the mask and makes one of those sharp smiles that’s too bright, too straight-edged, and painful-looking. Like he has a knife where his mouth should be. “Guess now the only drama left to stir up is how jealous I am over how much better Shellhead’s presents are.” He wedges himself between Peter and the armrest. “Shove over, Charlotte.”

“Don’t be jealous. Jealousy’s annoying,” Peter says, dragging himself sideways down the couch to make a little more room. His bones are starting to feel... floppy. Gravity is being a bit more playful with him than usual, too.

“Y’know, it’s funny...” says Wade.

Peter’s head is woozy now, but he doesn’t want to be rude, so he obliges with a “What’s funny?”

“You and the Avengers.”

Another pause.

“How so?” says Peter, a little reluctantly, because if Wade is making him play this stupid well-since-you-twisted-my-arm game, what he has to say is probably not going to feel great to hear.

“It just kind of astounds me how it seems like you *know* them so well...”

“Well, yeah. I mean, we’ve spent a lot of time around each other over the years so I’ve had plenty of time to obser—“

“No, I mean how you know *them* well enough to turn them into birds and psychoanalyze their apology-gifts, but *they* don’t even seem to understand that you’re a real live grownup with, y’know, agency and rights and stuff.”

Peter stares at him.

“It’s just weird,” Wade says with a handwave. “Especially since according to popular opinion, *you’re* supposed to be the ‘socially stunted’ one.” He makes the sarcastic finger-quotes, which Peter appreciates. “It’s like they’re actively trying to *not* try, or something. I dunno.”

The room goes just a tiny bit sideways, but it feels good. “That sounds like a zen koan,” says Peter, fighting down an abrupt giggle-fit. “How does one try to not try. Try by not trying.”

Wade props his head on a fist and peers over at him. “If Spider-Man takes painkillers in the forest, does he still get high?”

“Indubitably!” says Peter.

“Those kicked in fast.”

Peter shakes his head. “Right on schedule. My body metabolizes drugs like Germany runs its trains. I could’ve done a countdown. Maybe next time I will. T-minus ten.” He flops an arm over and thwaps Wade’s chest with the back of his hand. “And no, for real, don’t get jealous ‘bout the weird Spider-suits. There’s no point.”

In the end, Peter actually does like Wade’s lenses better than any of the ones in Tony’s masks.

They make colors a little bit softer.

Upon idle investigation late that night, the StarkPad turns out to be preloaded with an entire series of zombie FPS games and HD copies of possibly every bird documentary ever produced (as well as several NatGeo specials on spiders). And that's... okay, that's a really sweet gesture. Actual *thought* went into this. He can feel his resolve to stay angry at Tony give way just a little bit.

He's read some good reviews of the zombie games.

Too bad Peter now feels leery of any piece of tech that's passed through Tony's hands, even one as blandly commercial as this. There are just too many different ways the tablet could secretly transmit information back to Tony.

Such a shame. He hasn't allowed himself to want a StarkPad since it's not like he could ever afford the retail on one, but now that he's had one in his hands, yeah, it's looking very, very shiny.

All well.

He buries it in the smaller box under the med supplies.

Time slides off the rails.

During the more lucid hours, when the painkillers are starting to wear off but it's too soon to take another dose, Peter occupies himself with removing the eyes from one of the prototype Spidey masks and installing Wade's lenses in their place. And, since he can always stand to have more spare suits in his closet, he selects the least "upgraded" one from the pile and sets about painstakingly scraping off the spider emblems and redoing them himself with Sharpies he found in a kitchen drawer, because the spiders' legs were pointing the wrong way.

During the less lucid hours, which is most of them, he sleeps. Or he lets Wade goad him into arguments that make literally no sense (like whether or not it's racist to name dog breeds after their countries of origin, or whether a Dutch oven could be considered a sexual act). Or he plays Smash Brothers with Wade, or he has singing matches with Wade where the songs get increasingly obscure and you lose when you don't know the lyrics, or — he might've dreamed this one, but he could almost *swear* that at one point on that first or second day, before Peter's drug tolerance increased, Wade got him to do "Miss Mary Mack" with him. (Peter will never be certain if it really happened, because that memory is *really* hazy and he's too embarrassed to ask.)

At some point, during some moment that Peter also can't quite remember, Wade gives him a burner phone.

He tries Aunt May's number a few times but gets kicked to voicemail each time, and each time he hangs up, silent. She must be pulling extra shifts. (Again Peter remembers that he's *fired*, and again he ruthlessly chases that thought off. On top of everything else, he *so* cannot properly deal with that yet.)

Eventually, though, he is able to leave Aunt May a stuttering message about a friend. Who invited him on a camping trip. And there's no cell reception. This is a borrowed phone. At um. A gas station. And they'll be gone for um. A while. Not sure. And sorry for forgetting to tell her ahead of time. But it's fine. He's fine. Everything's fine. He'll see her when he gets back. Sorry. He loves her bye.

...There's no way in hell she'll buy it, but she won't return the message with a bunch of questions, either. And she'll probably ask minimal questions about the "camping trip" when they do see each other again, because Aunt May is amazing and lets Peter get away with not telling her certain things. And she knows he's safe now so she won't worry herself to death. That's what counts, right?

(These are the things he tells himself.)

Either way it's the best he can do for now. And she's been telling him that his whole life, hasn't she? *No one can ever do more than their best, Peter Benjamin Parker, so just cut it out.*

Don't beat yourself up, Peter; that's the world's job, not yours.

You're your own worst enemy, Peter.

One of the first things that happens which Peter can later isolate in his memory as a standalone event that actually-and-without-doubt Happened is the morning he pushes himself up to a sitting position and, in a sudden — and oddy *defiant* — surge of decisiveness, yanks off the eyepatch. "Aaand fuck that shit," he declares.

He tries to crush it in his palm but the stiff material keeps unfolding itself.

"Fuck what shit?" Wade asks, leaning in the doorway, and when he looks at Peter his whole body stops cold. His mask is on and the only expression that makes its way through the material this time is very big eyes. The rest is unsettlingly blank.

"Fuck *this* shit," Peter says and, since the eyepatch refuses to be destroyed with the proper amount of melodrama, instead he uses the elastic to slingshot it across the room. It bounces off Wade's face and drops to the floor, utterly ignored.

Peter bears with the mostly blank stare for a few confusing seconds, hands twisting the fabric of the blanket into little folded spirals. "You okay?" he asks, and after another second or so he gets a slow-mo nod.

"*Damn*," is all Wade says, with great feeling, before walking on.

"Wait, what? What do you mean, 'damn'?" Peter calls after him. "Good 'damn' or bad 'damn'?" No answer. And with an inflection like *that*, it certainly wasn't *nothing*. "Wade! Good 'damn' or bad 'damn'?"

God, sometimes it's more annoying when he *doesn't* talk.

"Damn," says Peter.

Once the surface injuries begin healing up, it only highlights how much the damage to his bones hurts. If anything it hurts *worse* than it did before, and he's considerably more reluctant to push through it now. Some deep animal instinct producing the kind of fear he can't ignore, the same sort of fear that keeps you from being able to bite all the way through your own skin even though the average human's jaw strength is more than equal to the task.

Even with the splint Tony sent over, he just can't make himself use that leg. It's not the pain, it's

the panic.

At first, he tries going up the wall, with the idea of just swinging himself across the ceiling hands-only and letting his legs dangle like a kid on the monkey bars. He gets as far as lifting his arms above his head before his ribs dislocate all the fuck over again and, once his vision stops swimming and he can pull himself out of the fetal position, his first act is to vow not to try that again, and his second act is to call for Wade because he still needs to get to the bathroom one way or another.

So, far more often than not, Peter needs help getting from room to room.

And help getting up off the couch or bed.

All of which necessitates a lot of touching. More-awkward-than-usual touching, no less, because most of his obvious noninvasive contact points are scabbed, bruised, broken, or sometimes still bleeding, and therefore off the menu. Wade's hands end up just above Peter's hips a lot, and to get leverage from there they have to kinda tilt Peter's whole body against Wade's, kinda-sorta face-first because otherwise it rips his ribs out of place again.

It's not the pain, it's the touching, and that's its own kind of pain. It's his skin cells running around screaming like people on fire, and there being no room in front of his face, and Wade's *breath* on his face, and that wave of terror like the moment you realize *you're suffocating, right now*. It's a *lot* and, in the beginning, Peter doesn't expect to adjust to it at all, ever.

He adjusts to it *fully* after maybe four, maybe five days.

He adjusts to it and then some.

(It has something to do with Wade's scent, he thinks. Objectively he still wouldn't describe it as a pleasant smell, but since when does objectivity have anything to do with what is or isn't comfortable or reassuring or desirable?)

He pretty much never needs help getting down *on* to the couch or bed. Sometimes he asks for it anyway.

And then feels guilty.

And then does it again anyway.

This isn't the worst Peter's ever been hurt in his life.

At least, he's been hurt approximately this badly before.

He's pretty sure, anyway.

Although his memories of past injuries and convalescent periods are fuzzy — of all the things his brain thinks are worth holding on to, a lot of information about pain and bodily damage doesn't really make the list, because his brain's counterintuitive like that sometimes — he feels nonetheless certain that he's been in a roughly similar state before.

He can tell because of all the little things that come up. They don't feel like *Nasty Little Surprises* so much as *Things I Was Happy To Have Forgotten*.

Such delightful details as the fact that good painkillers eventually make him constipated as hell.

Or how itchy and greasy his hair can really get — and how it takes on a stiff clumpy texture like wet straw — because until he regrows more skin, just standing *near* a running shower feels like being flayed alive with a weedwhacker.

Or the way all his bones start to ache from lying around all the time. (Or the way his brain starts to *twitch* from lying around all the time.)

They never show you this stuff in action movies. Bruce Willis never has to gingerly “bathe” with baby wipes after taking out the bad guys. Not on-screen anyway.

One little detail that is actually new — although he looks forward to blocking it out of his memory in the near future — is how he needs to hide a bucket under the bed. Because most of the time he and his broken leg can’t make it to the bathroom without help, and sometimes it’s the dead of night, and he *refuses* to wake Wade up for something like *that*.

There’s even a bonus detail that follows it, too: the part where Peter then needs to *live with* that bucket right under the bed after it’s been used, and where the smell gets a lot stronger a lot *faster* than he would’ve ever guessed. And the part where he has to wait until Wade is outside to stealthily empty it himself, which usually involves sliding both himself and the bucket across the floor all the way to the bathroom and back because he still can’t walk, keeping one frantic ear open for sounds of Wade coming back.

Until one time Wade comes back (*not* while Peter’s trying to empty the bucket, thank god) and props a pair of crutches against the wall without comment.

...Okay, not actually “without comment” at all, but his commentary is exclusively about meatloaf, and so roundabout in nature that Peter can’t tell if it’s meatloaf-the-food-that-even-ketchup-couldn’t-save or Meatloaf-the-singer-of-rock-ballads-and-Hot-Patootie. Trying to figure it out distracts Peter long enough for Wade to slip out of the room again before Peter can ask any questions, about meatloaf *or* the crutches.

Next time Wade goes outside, Peter stows the bucket back in the mouse-turd-covered closet where he found it.

And “forgets” the crutches in the living room so he can ask for help getting out of bed one more time.

Somewhere along the way, Peter realizes that Wade’s skin has one of the most amazing stinging-textures possibly on the entire planet Earth.

But when he thinks about it, his ears get really hot, and the breath inside his chest turns thin and weightless. Which is such a bizarre response to *Yay, new stim!* that Peter gets confused, which makes him jumpy and stuttery, whenever he thinks about it.

He keeps his hands to himself and tries not to think about it.

He ends up thinking about it so intently that he completely blanks out their *Orange is the New Black* binge-watch. And then he dreams about it, and then he wakes up with hot ears and shallow breath.

The first time Peter can use the shower without feeling like he's being attacked with belt sanders, it feels so good he just leans haphazardly against the shower wall and sobs until the hot water runs out. Then he hurriedly shampoos his gross hair four times and crawls out shivering.

Peter becomes intimately familiar with the way the daylight shifts hour-by-hour across the small patch of kitchen that he can see through the hole in the bedroom wall.

He gets used to Wade watching him through that hole while he pretends to sleep. This is one of those things he *shouldn't* get used to, he's sure of it. It should be creepy.

It should be creepy and unhealthy like in those stupid vampire books people love to make fun of.

But Peter has this problem —

("Problem"?)

Peter has this *thing* where he can't help but judge Wade primarily by Deadpoolian standards. And according to those standards, the fact that Wade stays on the other side of the wall to do all his watching makes it actually very respectful and weirdly noninvasive.

Besides, it's Wade's house. Factory. Squat. Whatever. It's Wade's place and Peter's in *Wade's bed*. It's not like Wade is creeping on his apartment window with binoculars.

And besides that, Peter would almost definitely do the exact same thing. Most people would, he thinks. They might have guilt or hangups about it but they'd still *do* it.

And... and besides *that*... Peter really likes getting that silent reminder that he isn't here alone.

He is very much used to being alone. (One of those things that it was wise to get used to, a *should* and not a *shouldn't*, that he coached himself into doing over the years. But he sort of wishes he hadn't quite managed that particular adjustment.)

He starts to hold off on falling asleep for real until after Wade's come by the hole and watched him for a while.

He couldn't bring himself to just throw out the StarkPad, and eventually its technological siren song wafting into the silence of his boredom is too much to resist. He digs out the burner and punches in Tony's number.

Tony, just be honest ok? is this tablet tapped or anything like that? spider man

He's barely hit send when it buzzes in his hand. *what no why would i even*

Peter's still mentally composing a reply when Tony adds, *ok no thats fair, i totally deserve that & your smart 2 be concernd*

but no

the tablets pristine ok, even Hill would have her work cut out taking a peek in there

i promise

also im sorry about the tracker too

that was bullsht i dunno wat I was thinking

pep already avenged u 4 that, she rly let me have it. Cap tried too but wasn't as vicious, after the

*flaying i got from pep it was almost cute
it was a dick move & im sorry ok*

Again, Tony can't let the pause carry on long enough for Peter to formulate an actual response. (Tony has that problem a lot.) *ok i get that I betrayed ur trust n all but look at it this way. why would my apology gift for stomping on ur personal agency also include a thing that stomps on ur personal agency*

?

it doesnt ok

u still there?

am i on ur forever shitlist now or what

hey look man im basically groveling here this is as far as i can stretch. throw me a bone gimme

SOMething to work w/

where do we stand

Peter works his thumbs as fast as he can and before Tony completely loses it. *slow down man
Give me a minute*

About five minutes tick by uninterrupted while Peter stares blankly at the phone. He tells himself this conversation would be so much easier to navigate if he weren't doped up on painkillers, but in the end that's just a twisted form of wishful thinking. It's *Tony* on the other end, after all. A shrill screaming blue jay.

Eventually there's only one response left that he can't completely shoot down, so it's the only one he gives:

Thank you.

And it's incomplete and it *doesn't* mean their relationship is repaired, but. For now, it has to be enough.

Tony doesn't answer, so Peter assumes it is.

It doesn't occur to Peter to wonder what Wade does when he disappears for a few hours each day after breakfast and comes back sweaty and winded, but not bloody or particularly injured, and always in a grumpy mood. Until the moment Wade comes back carrying what looks like a very expensive, very broken RC toy and throws it on the fridge-table in front of him. Peter sits up in interest; he's just getting sick of shooting virtual zombies for the day so the timing couldn't be better.

"Here," says Wade. "I finally caught one alive. Have fun." And after a long, moaning stretch of his arms and a protracted fart (and then a pleased snicker about the fart) he slumps off toward the bathroom and starts the shower running.

Peter sets the StarkPad aside and stares at the contraption. One of its little helicopter blades keeps trying to spin in fits and starts. Like a window-struck bird twitching a wing. He feels sorry for it, in that curiously intense way you sometimes empathize with inanimate objects, until he reaches out and turns it over and recognizes it for what it is: a spy drone.

And then he remembers the night of the blast, when everyone made Tony say he wouldn't spy on them but everyone knew he would anyway and just kind of sighingly accepted it as given. Peter forgot about that.

He stops feeling sorry for the gadget.

Instead he breaks it down swiftly and with very little mercy, using super-strength where he'd normally prefer snips or pliers, laying all the parts on the fridge-table in rows from biggest to smallest. Then he picks apart the individual components and spreads out the smaller bits and pieces, until the final array looks like a neatly sorted collection of the kind of mismatched crap Uncle Ben used to keep in rusty coffee cans in the garage.

The actual camera part he leaves intact, because it's a camera, and even though it's the kind for video, he has as much aversion to destroying any kind of camera as Gwen had to burning any kind of book. But he detaches all the wires from it, snaps the actual transmitter into fragments, and puts the camera lens-down in the middle of the dissection table. He'll deal with that later.

Right now there's a much more important matter to attend to. He pulls the burner from his pocket.

You said no more spy shit, he types to Tony.

There's an uncharacteristic pause before Tony eloquently replies, *huh?*

"Oh my god, don't be dense," says Peter. *Drones*, he types.

*ohhh hey man its not liek that
its not about u ok those were never about u
its about him
given his history i think a smidge of caution is warranted. u gotta admit tht much*

Peter puts down the phone, tangles his fingers in his hair, closes his eyes and counts to ten. It doesn't really work. He takes a breath before picking up the phone again and composing his message very, very slowly. *I'll only say this once. Back the FUCK off my friend, Tony Stark, or you and I will have A Problem.*

There's no response for a while, and Peter's starting to think that's the end of the conversation when it buzzes one more time.

duly noted. drawing back the troops, relax ok

And that time it *is* the end of discussion.

Wade comes back wearing nothing but a towel around his neck and sweatpants with the Slytherin crest, and he gives a low whistle. "Wow. You autopsied the shit outta that thing."

"What can I say, I like to be thorough," says Peter, pocketing the phone.

"And *fast*. I was in there, what, fifteen minutes? You *obliterated* that thing. No, don't look at me like that, I'm crazy impressed. I'm kinda pissed at myself for missing it, actually. Oh. Oh christ, Spidey, remind me to show you how to dismantle and reassemble a sniper rifle sometime, because watching you do that just made it onto my bucket list. You and your clever little spider-fingers..."

Peter twists his mouth sideways. "It made me cranky," he says. "It got what it deserved."

"*Woof*." Wade scans the leftovers. "Anything fun in there?"

"Most of it's scrap, but I might be able to use the camera for something. The little propellor fan thingies are probably good for reuse too, but I'd have to put them back together first, and my imagination's coming up short on good ideas for repurposing anyway." He scratches his head,

hard. Really digs his nails in there, such that his nails exist. “Is that what you’ve been doing when you’ve been going outside? Chasing drones?”

Wade makes a fart-noise with his mouth and pulls down on both ends of the towel. “Gotta stay in shape somehow. This incredibly alluring figure doesn’t keep itself. Besides, I’m the only neighborhood watch this neighborhood needs.”

Peter shakes his head at the mess on the table. “*So much bullshit,*” he grumbles.

“Me, or that?”

“*Him,*” says Peter. “Them.”

“Eh, it’s what they do. You rub elbows with SHIELD long enough and it starts fuckin’ up your concept of basic civil liberties and what is or isn’t your own fuckin’ business. I know Shellhead does his best to flip off Big Brother in a general sense, but just about everyone on this mudball changes their ethical tune the second that stuff gets personal. I’m sure he managed to convince himself this was the lesser evil or some shit.”

Peter raises an eyebrow. “You saying it doesn’t *bother* you?”

“What’re you, nuts?” He rolls the towel between his hands and whip-cracks it at empty air. “You think I’ve been gunning down and chasing these little fuckers over every warehouse on the block because they *don’t* bother me? You think I’d crash *here* if I wasn’t incredibly concerned about privacy for *very good reasons*? And it’s fuckin’ ruined. You know as soon as you’re done bein’ on the mend I gotta bail on this place. It’s the best place I’ve had in a while and now it’s a burned bridge, hardcore. Banner might’ve kept the deets close to his chest, but those stupid little voyeur-bots screwed the fuckin’ pooch. Lost cause now, dude. Out of house and home. I mean, Tony Stark has a *really* bad track record when it comes to keeping home addresses private. Fuckin’ *UPS* knows where the fuck we are, y’know? I *hate* apartment hunting, Petey. I hate it so very, *very* fucking much.” He forces an angry breath out through his nose. Rubs the back of his head. “Can I sit with you?”

“It’s your couch.”

“You know what I mean.”

Peter looks up at Wade’s chest, because that’s usually more or less where his eyes land anyway. The chest isn’t usually exposed, though. Peter knows its shape, the crags and valleys of it, the way ribs move in and out of relief as he breathes, the tiny flashing twitch of heartbeat in the middle of his sternum — Peter knew it all a long time ago — but spread Wade’s stimmy hands-face-neck texture on top of it and it becomes something entirely different. His fingertips feel kinda squirmy as he takes in all those color changes and all that *texture*, tries to rework it into the *Chest* subsection of the *Deadpool/Wade* column of *How To Recognize People You Know*.

It’s slow work. He really wants to touch.

Peter’s breath gets faint. He really *really* wants to touch.

It takes him a minute or so to remember that he has a question to answer. “Yeah. You can sit. Come on.”

Wade leaves the towel on the floor and fumps down so hard it bounces the whole couch. For a while he just sits there, smelling like nice soap and looking like nobody came to his birthday party.

And even though the damage is already done, and Wade's already getting driven out of his house (factory — squat — whatever), Peter is thinking that if Tony lied to him about pulling back the drones and even *one* of them is still out there, then the Bugle will get to front-page the story of how the wall-crawling menace started the superpower brawl that destroyed all of Midtown by waltzing into Avengers Tower and kicking Iron Man straight in the nutsack.

And he *means* it.

Wade makes a little noise of agreement, presumably in response to whatever commentary the boxes had to offer, and smiles crookedly at Peter. "You wanna order Thai and watch *Sense8*? I've heard good things about it but haven't really sat down to watch it yet and that's absurd. What's the point of using TV to avoid doing stuff if you're gonna start avoiding TV too? Where does the cycle end?"

Peter hasn't seen it yet either.

They complain at each other about how confusing the show is, then pause it to argue over which of them gets more confused more often by real-life, everyday stuff (each insisting that it's himself and not the other). The food arrives before one of them can win the argument, and they hit play again. By the time they're done eating, the show's making more sense and the characters are getting compelling, and Wade asks (amid much stuttering and throat-clearing) if he can lean against Peter's less-injured side.

After a moment's consideration, Peter doesn't see why not.

The weight of him is steady, is just the right amount of *warm*, is *good*. Sorta squeezes some of the tension out of Peter's body, that long-term tension that you don't even notice is there until you get the tiniest bit of relief from it. And once that sliver of relief happens, suddenly you get this idea that your entire personality would be drastically improved if you could get rid of the rest of the tension and keep it away forever.

Peter realizes he's just blanked out what was probably an important scene, and determinedly returns his attention to the screen.

Not long after that, Wade pulls his legs up under himself and drops his head onto Peter's shoulder. "This okay?"

Peter picks up the nearest piece of the dismantled drone and fidgets with it, kind of frantically. Hot ears. Shallow breath.

"S fine," says Peter, a little high-pitched.

Wade lifts his head a fraction. "You sure 'bout that? You don't sound sure."

"I'm sure. Yes. Just surprised me. But. Yes." *So much* yes. He untenses a fraction more when Wade resettles. He breathes as deeply as his ribs will allow (they're getting better) because if he keeps doing that this funny, lightweight breathing he'll black out in no time. Best get that shit under control *now*. He turns his head and sniffs delicately at the soap-and-Wade smell. That helps too.

"This show's turning out good after all," Wade says.

"Capheus is my favorite," says Peter.

Wade hums in agreement, and Peter can feel the smile against his shoulder. "He reminds me of you," says Wade.

When Wade goes outside the next day for drone patrol, he comes back only forty-five minutes later, not sweaty this time. And when he peels off the panda-mask he looks confused. He stops short when he sees Peter on the couch, fiddling with the captured spy-cam. He looks from Peter to the camera and back, studies him narrow-eyed for a minute.

Peter blinks back at him.

Innocently.

“Mm-hm,” Wade says. *You are SO full of shit*, says his tone of voice.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” says Peter.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Just as well, then,” says Peter.

“Mm-hm.”

They both know the boundaries have moved, and they both know that they both know.

Peter’s more than content with not acknowledging it out loud; doing so would be not only redundant but embarrassing. His general strategy about the whole thing, uncharacteristically enough, is “deal with each individual situation as it comes up and never, ever, *ever* analyze what’s really going on or why”. Which is... no strategy at all, really.

Wade has evidently elected to pick up the slack — or possibly to take this opportunity to play out a *Freaky Friday* bit — because *his* approach is so Peter-ishly methodical that he even times his actions on a steady breakfast-lunch-dinner-midnight snack schedule.

He maps out Peter’s new personal boundaries. Like in the very beginning.

No, not like in the beginning. He’s revised his M.O.

Now, instead of just trying to get near him or touch him and then gauging Peter’s reaction, Wade asks first. And when the answer is no, he changes the subject completely and without fanfare, and doesn’t ask for anything else until the next scheduled testing-time.

And *more* than that, if Peter says yes to a thing once, Wade *still asks* when he wants to try the same thing again later on, and doesn’t take that first yes as meaning now-and-forever-until-the-end-of-days.

Nobody does that. Peter’s never really remembered to do that (not that it’s come up often, because you kinda have to be keen on touching people for it to really matter). Even Gwen didn’t remember to do that, and Gwen owned a “consent is sexy” t-shirt.

Peter’s pretty sure that he’s saying yes to a lot of things that he wouldn’t have been okay with if Wade hadn’t given him the opportunity to say yes first. He’s also pretty sure that Wade’s picked up on this, and that getting better results is the main reason why the consent-seeking has been so measured and consistent.

Sort of enlightened self-interest on Wade’s part. Peter decides he’s okay with this.

He's benefiting from the results too, after all. Just because they're *his* new boundaries doesn't mean he necessarily knows where they are, and he'd like to know. Even if they *are* just-for-Wade boundaries that won't have any bearing on his relationships with anyone else.

And, you know. He's human. He *likes* getting touched, when it isn't painful or terrifying or overwhelming or catastrophic or just one big heap of NO.

It's just... been a while since it wasn't any of those things. He's acclimating to the *idea* as much as he's acclimating to Wade sitting close enough that their legs touch, and Wade leaning against him, and Wade gently headbutting him, and Wade looping his arm through Peter's, and Wade petting his hair.

Wade seems to have a thing for that last one, because he asks to do it so much that Peter eventually tells him to assume it's always a yes and Peter will let him know if it's not a good time for it.

(As a new general rule, Peter likes Wade's hand in his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. He'd probably even ask for it himself, but Wade usually beats him to the punch.)

Peter's healing a lot faster now, is mostly off the painkillers, and can even limp around without the crutches, but some days aren't as easy. Today's been one of those, and by evening he gives up and goes back to the pain meds. It's been a few days since he needed them so his tolerance is gone, and twenty minutes after taking them, right on cue, he's starting to loop. Wade's got his fingers buried deep in Peter's hair and it feels really very rather *extra* good this time. He doesn't even care that *Golden Girls* is still on despite their agreement to switch to *Community* after dinner.

Wade gives his hair a faint tug and shuffles over to the far end of the couch. "C'mon, hey, lay down. You're passing out again."

Peter grunts and looks blearily over, and when his gaze lands on Wade's leg he decides it looks like an extremely comfortable place to sleep. Plus he's fond of the texture of those pants, the nice soft thick cotton. He flops sideways and puts his cheek against them, and, yes, yes these are excellent pants. Ten out of ten, do recommend.

"Oh," Wade says. "Wow. Um. Okay..."

"D'you want me to move?" says Peter, strongly hoping otherwise. Gravity will not be on his side if he needs to move again.

It's probably the drugs messing with his memory or perception, but he's pretty sure he's never heard that particular laugh out of Wade before. "No way, José," says Wade. "We're all good here. I mean I'm good if you're good, this is good, I mean it's good by me and good and I'm sorry I seem to have lost my ability to adjective."

"I like Sophia," Peter says, pointing at the screen with a wobbly arm. "Snarky li'l biddy. She's the best one."

Wade sighs so loudly it sounds like he's in pain. "This is literally the *only* time I'm gonna let you get away with saying that, and *only* because you volunteered to put your head in my lap."

Peter rubs the side of his face against the lovely, lovely pants-texture.

And *both* of Wade's hands end up in his hair in a hurry, bringing Peter's head to stop. "Okay you *really* can't do that though."

"Sorry. I'll be good."

“You’ll be — *Hhhh... ohhh* my fucking god you little [lots of under-the-breath Spanish].” Eventually the words trail off into an agitated (or possibly frustrated) noise, and Wade shifts his weight around for a while before finally resuming the head-scratches. “You’re doped up,” Wade grumbles.

“No kiddin’.”

“Just... just shut up and watch TV.”

“I din’t do nothin’,” says Peter.

“Like hell you didn’t,” Wade growls, mostly to himself.

Peter hums a questioning sound, and Wade answers by flattening his palm against the side of Peter’s head for a moment. His hands are never cold. It’s kind of miraculous. “You’re already good,” Wade says, quietly.

The end credits start rolling, then the opening theme again as the next episode starts. One second Peter is thinking about asking Wade to switch to the *Community* DVDs, the next he’s mentally singing along. *Traveled down the road and back again...*

“Why you so nice to me,” Peter mumbles.

“It’s all part of my nefarious plan to get into your pants.”

“These are your pants,” Peter says, because it’s true. He’s pretty much only been wearing Wade’s clothes since he got here. Which is still a mystery he hasn’t cracked yet...

“Details,” Wade sniffs. “The end game’s still the same.”

...Maybe Wade figures he got Peter some new clothes the once and that’s already doing him a favor, so it should be enough? But Peter has his own clothes already at his apartment that they could go get... He hasn’t asked about it yet because Wade keeps *offering* him things from the closet, and even though they’re all too big, they’re also all ridiculously soft. And they smell overpoweringly of Wade, which Peter is totally okay with. He likes having Wade’s scent on his skin. It feels safe and he *likes* it.

But he *doesn’t* like not knowing the reason behind a confusing social arrangement. Not knowing presents a risk of accidentally acting in opposition to the other person’s understanding of things, and getting them mad at him. Not a gamble he likes taking. Not when the person in question is this important.

Sleepily he circles around the topic in his brain, in time with Wade’s fingers circling around the surface his head, trying to find a place to begin. “They’re baggy...” he starts, knowing it’s the wrong place to start.

Wade answers too loudly and too fast, and the words clang against the dialogue from the TV. Peter listens to the sounds, numbly, not understanding. “If you have a problem with wearing my pants you’re more than welcome to take them off, y’know. *Believe* me I would *not* have a problem with that. ...Except maybe right now. Not right now. Because you’re doped up. So maybe you just shut up and leave ‘em on for now and we can discuss the fate of your pants and what’s inside them *later*.”

Peter scowls to himself, the tangled rat’s-nest of syllables coming to rest inside one of his memory’s holding tanks, undeciphered. Blanche has a new boyfriend. Peter can’t stop tracing the

edge of the hole his hand found on the edge of the couch cushion. One particular molecule in his scalp keeps lighting up with pleasure each time one of Wade's nails brushes over it. The image of a pair of dark maroon sweatpants keeps flitting around his thoughts, insistent but meaningless, and too wavery to pin down, like one of those mosquitoes that keeps whining in your ear but is always out of reach when you try to swat it, still out of reach even now, even now with superpowered reflexes...

And he's higher than the interest rate on his student loans, so all of this is terribly funny.

Or, it would be.

If his guts weren't wrapping themselves defensively around that stabbing feeling right in the middle. The oh-shit-something's-not-right-pay-attention feeling. It's not quite Spidey-sense, it stops just short of that — but it's about as dire a warning as his body can give otherwise.

In his memory, the Avengers are all chanting the same line at him — separate memories that his brain's decided to cobble together into one composite moment, he knows that much — but he can't make out the words in his memory any more than he can the words from the TV. They're just a stubborn, hollow echo, repeating a pattern. Bird calls.

And he's *high*, so he feels himself giggling for no fucking reason. It's not funny at all, except it *is*, except it's not... Wade's hands pause in his hair just long enough for Wade to sigh, and even now Peter can tell it's an unhappy sigh.

The Avengers are still chanting when the drugs wear off a little after one in the morning and Peter finds himself in the bed, rank with flop sweat, as awake as if someone kicked him. The internal chanting finally, finally coalesces into something understandable.

Ignore it, that's just how he is sometimes, they're saying.

"What're you talking about?" he asks out loud. His voice sounds rough.

Irritably he throws back the cover and scratches his ankles, his arms, the back of his neck. The clothes are drenched and it's itchy and prickly as fuck and his skin's chilly and the rest of him's way too hot and how's he supposed to *think* like this? In disgust he peels off the t-shirt (he can move his arms freely these days) and, as he yanks down the pants, his memory decides that now's as good a time as ever to open up the holding tanks and replay the stuff Wade said earlier that night.

The end game's still the same.

Peter freezes, doubled over his legs with the pants still bunched around his ankles.

End game?

That's just how he is sometimes.

Yeah okay, but... "*end game*"? Peter buries his hands in the folds upon folds of too much fabric wrapped around his feet, the pants' softness spoiled by chill sweat. His fingers burrow in anyway, tangle themselves up in it as he rocks himself a bit, thinking and thinking and *trying* to think but mostly being lobbed back and forth between *end game* and *how he is*.

The stabby feeling in his middle comes back in force.

There's nothing quite as maddening as being really *bothered* by something but not understanding what that thing even is, much less *why*.

Finding some resolve, Peter sits cross-legged (pants stretching between his feet, now folded under his knees) and lowers his head into his hands, tapping the sides of his face in an alternating pattern as he keeps rocking. (Being more of a tactile stimmer, he doesn't get the urge to rock very often, but when he does, it helps like nothing else in the world.)

Okay so — what else did Wade say?

My nefarious plan to get into your pants, his memory helpfully supplies. *The fate of your pants and what's inside them*. Which doesn't seem particularly unusual coming from Wade, until his memory adds *You're doped up*, more than once, in a grouchy and significant tone.

But... wait, no. What difference would it make if Peter was drugged? But Wade kept coming back to that like it was a sticking point, like — he kept coming back to it in connection with the question of pants and whether or not Peter was wearing any, like — Peter stops rocking for a second — like there was actually an issue of *consent* involved...

But no, it's just flirting and innuendo. Just part of Wade's normal conversational arsenal, like allusions to pop culture. Just harmless blather thrown in for flavor. *Just how he is sometimes, just ignore it*. Just.

Right?

...And then, almost painstakingly, he remembers putting his head on Wade's leg — and more to the point, Wade's reaction to that. The abrupt downshift in mood, and *you really can't do that*, and shifting his weight around all uncomfortable-like as if he —

Oh.

For a few seconds there's nothing in his head but astonished silence.

Then Peter's breath turns weightless, his ears run hot. And now there's heat low in his belly, too, gathering up, heavy and confrontational, and then lower than that —

Ohhh *shit*.

That's just how he is sometimes, Peter's brain chants. *Just ignore it. That's just how he is sometimes*.

Just ignore it.

Peter's dick, as it turns out, is not the type to join in on group chants.

And this is *not* just morning wood.

Okay that's — no wait. No. What?! No just hold on here — just —

Okay *setting that very much to the side* for now, because... because just *no*, just *not right now*... back to the goddamn *point* please, brain, thank you very much...

If that — okay, sake of argument here, just *purely* for the sake of argument, just *say* that Wade was actually-really-for-real with the come-ons (*this time*) — if Peter missed *those* signals in the moment, then what about, oh, you know. *Everything else*?

Every remark about Peter's ass, or lament about Peter's "no-touchie" boundaries, or offhanded declaration of lust, or LOL JK explicit description of how Wade would fuck him, or "brokeback my mountain" joke, or mental dressup game that put Peter in some sexy character's clothes, or — or burrito-with-guac and whether that counts as "asking"...

Oh god. Peter hears himself groan out a tiny, broken, miserable sound. He stops tapping his face and starts dragging his nails down it instead, hard. If the nails weren't bitten they'd be drawing blood.

*That's just how he is somet*i— No. No Peter *can't* "just ignore" this.

Also, to be honest? It's not "sometimes" so much as it's "pretty fucking often".

...And it kind of always *has* been. Hasn't it? Which means this — this ah, this *thing*, this — let's call it the new interpretation — has *always* been a part of Peter-and-Wade, and Spidey-and-Deadpool before that.

And here Peter's been the whole time, tra-la-la-ing along without a clue in the world, willfully ignoring what has evidently been a key component of the relationship (at least as far as Wade is evidently concerned, because, seriously, "*end game*", on top of all the other things he likes to say...?).

This is no longer for the sake of argument. This is *evidence*.

Peter's looking right at his arms and legs folded up under him but he still loses track of them. They seem to belong to someone else now. He can't quite feel them. The universe becomes something pixellated, alien, unstable.

What the fuck even is their friendship?

Oh, splendid, now Peter's boner is gone as fast as it arrived because he's having a shitfucking *anxiety attack*. He curls in on himself and knots his fingers in his hair and *yanks* it and gasps, and gasps, and gasps, and — he's actually pretty good at keeping a semi-clear head during anxiety attacks, because he's had tons of unfortunate practice. But usually these things come out of nowhere, just a sense of overwhelm at the world in general. They aren't usually because of a particular thought.

His brain grabs that thought as if with teeth, and clamps down.

Was it this all along?

Peter's chest is splitting in half, he's sure of it. His hands clutch at it, try to hold it together.

Is THAT why he's always been so good to you? So much better to you than anyone else is? To ingratiate himself to you? Make himself indispensable so you're too scared of losing him to say no? Because you're alone and you're starved in more ways than one and you're GULLIBLE? Easy mark, puny Parker, you're an easy fucking mark. Always have been. It's all over you. Everyone sees it from a mile away, and not just the bad guys. Harry saw it. Gwen saw it. Aunt May sees it. The Avengers see it. Of COURSE Wade sees it. Big fucking target on your back and Wade's a great marksman, he couldn't not-see it if he tried.

Maybe he doesn't even think of it that way. I bet he doesn't. He's just playing a long game and maybe it's not even conscious.

But he... he has a goal here, doesn't he? Everyone has a goal with you. Even if it's just to make

themselves feel good “protecting” you or trying to “fix” you, they all want something. They all EXPECT something. And if you don’t perform the way they expect then they erase you. Even Gwen
—

No, don’t bring her up.

Even Gwen was trying to “fix” me —

I said don’t bring her up. Gwen was DON’T BRING HER UP Gwen tried to “fix” me and she only agreed to go out with me as a last-ditch effort to “fix” me and it still didn’t work and after that she was only my friend like it was an act of charity. Our friendship was a fucking community service project to her, you only pretended not to notice so she wouldn’t feel bad — no, you pretended not to notice because she was the only person who would even pretend to be your — you don’t have to keep denying it anymore, you can’t hurt her feelings anymore she’s DEAD —

I said don’t bring her up.

He lied when he said he didn’t want anything from you. It was a lie. It was a straight-up lie to your face. It had to be. It had to be. If he really didn’t want you for something in particular he’d just erase you with his eyes like everyone else does.

And you were STUPID to think otherwise. You just wanted to think otherwise. Maybe that was the joke you were supposed to ignore, and all the... all that other stuff, all that just-ignore-it stuff, was the part you should’ve paid attention to.

That you WOULD’VE paid attention to if you weren’t the worst, dumbest, thickest, most gullible sucker of a human ever to human.

At least now you know what he’s actually been after the whole time? At least now you know there even IS an “end game” for him?

At least now you KNOW.

Peter lifts his head, slowly. The panic’s not gone, but it’s ebbing, because his body’s too tired to keep on bearing it. It leaves behind that familiar hollow-sick-exhausted feeling in its place, along with a low-boiling rage and no shortage of unforgiving *humiliation*.

His chest still feels like it’s in at least two separate pieces, with miles and miles in between.

“So stupid,” he whispers.

Lost, he looks down at himself.

Take stock.

Mostly healed, a few stubborn bruises still hanging on, a few new scars to add to the pile. Leg’s probably still at least a little broken, but not enough to matter anymore. He still limps, he probably can’t run yet or stick a landing, but he can get around at low speed without leaning on anything now.

Without leaning on anyone.

He pokes his dick with a sneer. So what if he got hard? So what if he might’ve even eventually said y... Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter at all. Peter may not understand everything about how human relationships are supposed to work, and he knows that they’re all conditional to one extent

or another, but he's pretty fucking confident that friendship (or... whatever) isn't supposed to have a fucking *end game*, regardless of whether that end game is sexual or something else.

He puts up with enough of that shit from the world at large. He doesn't need to take it from friends (or... whatever) too. And a certain number of years ago, he promised himself he wouldn't, ever again. (It's one of many endless reasons why he had no friends between Gwen and Wade. Before Wade became part of his life, he'd been beginning to think that nobody ever becomes friends with someone unless they want something out of them other than friendship. He's beginning to think it again now.)

And Peter *said* it, didn't he? Not that long ago. Straight up and straight to Wade's face. *You have to tell me if you plan on using me for something.*

Was this Wade's version of "telling" him? Even though he speaks Spider-Man well enough to know by now that offhand jokes are not effective communication? (But oh — oh, Wade would be able to point back at the jokes and say, "See? I *did* tell you," and technically it would be true so Peter wouldn't be able to argue against it. "It's not *my* fault you didn't pick up on it." Harry in particular was always a big fan of that little trick. Got Peter to steal all kinds of crap from Mr. Osborn for him. Got Peter to write essays for him, got them both suspended — "Yeah, I *called* it 'collaboration,' not *my* fault you didn't know it was just a figure of speech.")

Stupid people and their stupid ulterior motives and their stupid plausible deniability.

Stupid Wade and his stupid joking-serious way of talking sometimes (more often than previously thought).

Stupid, *stupid* Peter for taking this long to realize it. *So* stupid.

He closes his eyes, opens up the *Major Bullets I Have Dodged* file, and stuffs the whole matter inside before drawing a deep breath and looking around the dark room.

...What now?

Another mental rearrangement of reality, for sure, and probably a lot more painful emoting later, but in the immediate, pragmatic sense — what the hell *now*?

He brings his knees up to his chest and takes the pants off from his ankles, sets them tiredly aside. There's quite a smell coming from them.

What now.

Take stock. It's dark and he's naked and everything that doesn't smell like him smells like Wade. If he wants to put dry clothes on, they'll be Wade's clothes. Again. Seriously, what's up with that? Peter's brain spits out about nearly a dozen possible motivations Wade might have for the clothes-thing, and "maybe he's just too lazy and assumes I don't mind it this way" is the only one that isn't creepy and/or sexual.

He's getting sidetracked. Take stock.

It's the dead of night. He's awake, and going by the lack of sound elsewhere, Wade is not. Though he's not entirely convinced anymore that Wade even *requires* normal human sleep, because almost every time Peter thinks he's asleep, turns out he's just pretending. And if —

He's doing it again. Take stock.

It's night, he's naked and alone and hurting in more ways than one and kinda hungry, and there is food in the kitchen here. He's probably healed enough to swing if he takes it slow and easy, but he doesn't particularly have anywhere else to go besides here. He can't tell Aunt May about *any* of this, and even if he were inclined to go to the Avengers, all of them (except maybe Clint, or Thor if he was on Earth, or possibly Sam if he weren't still stuck in DC, although he doesn't know Sam very well so it's hard to say) would toldja-so at him. And so really he doesn't particularly have anyone to talk to about this (or anything) besides... here.

Despite all that, he's having a more than tricky time convincing himself to just stay put a while longer. There's an instinct somewhere in a mysterious part of his brain screaming get out, get out, get out.

He could lie back down, and fail to fall asleep, and pretend none of these thoughts ever occurred to him. (Yeah, *and* he could also stroll into Jameson's office and unmask. Life's just brimming with possibilities.)

Get out, get out, get out.

Silent as he can, he wobbles to the hole in the wall, sticks his head through, looks around. Wade's sprawled on the couch in the dark; Peter can see his feet dangling off the edge of one armrest. The two split halves of Peter's chest move even farther apart and it's all he can do to keep breathing with his lungs feeling so exposed.

He steps back from the hole and looks down at his hands.

This is wrong. This is all wrong.

He leaves the bedroom, makes his way to where the boxes Tony sent are pushed up against the living room wall. His skin is pale all over and he feels like he's glowing the dark. He really, really hopes Wade is actually asleep.

Peter reaches into the bigger box and pulls out the suit and mask that he altered, then skittishly steals back to the bedroom with them. The material is rougher than it should be, thicker than he's used to, but it's a good amount of tightness around his body and it's not Wade's, it's *his*. Webshooters on.

"Albatross," he whispers, but he still feels like a hummingbird.

He doesn't know which one he is. Or if he's anything at all.

He pauses at the edge of the living room, looking only at the cardboard boxes. There are things in there he'd like to keep.

He leaves them where they are.

There's a coffee-stained notepad in the kitchen drawer second from the stove. He writes in Sharpie, flinching each time the marker tip squeaks against the paper. *Thank you for everything you've done.* He pauses. *You are a good person.*

The rest of it, Peter's brain can't fold into a shape that would fit inside words. The rest of it can stay unsaid. Miserable as this whole thing is, he wants to leave Wade with something good.

None of the windows are the type that actually open, and the front door is never really quiet. If the sound of it wakes Wade up — or if, once again, Wade's been secretly awake this whole time — he doesn't show any sign of it.

The warehouses are too short to swing from. Spider-Man walks, wobbly and lopsided, with his eyes mostly down and fingers picking at the fabric on his elbows, trusting the tingles to let him know if any of these shadows are planning on eating him. He hopes nobody takes a picture. This isn't a moment he wants on record. He tries to bury each second as it passes, sweeping clean the trail behind him.

He knows he's never going to be able to forget.

He keeps trying anyway. It's a long walk.

When he reaches a place where the buildings are taller, he switches from feet to webshooters. It's been a while — two weeks? three? — and he lets himself get distracted by the sensation of acting on pure muscle memory. It's the same feeling as when he hasn't ridden a bike in a long time. Confidence in his body's know-how, but also a fluttery vulnerability because he doesn't know what he's going to do next until he's already done it.

The wind doesn't feel friendly tonight. It keeps asking him what he's doing, and he keeps not having an answer.

His body leads him back to his apartment.

He goes in through the window and doesn't turn the lights on. The electricity's probably shut off by now anyway. It smells stale. He doesn't open the fridge. Rent is due soon, unless it's already past due, and anyway he can't pay it because he's never lived any way but paycheck to paycheck, and he's long since *fired*. His landlady's always been pretty understanding and sympathetic, super flexible on due dates. She says she's been there, and she likes that Peter shovels during the winter. He doesn't look forward to disappointing her.

He doesn't look forward to disappointing Aunt May whenever he gets around to showing up on her doorstep. He doesn't particularly miss Queens, or being an extra mouth feeding off of her salary, even if she never complained about it before.

He pulls a crushed box out of the recycling bin, reassembles it with duct tape, and starts dropping books into it.

The box is only half full when he drops it from numb hands, and then he stands there at the edge of the stale studio, head on an angle, not thinking much of anything at all.

He stands there.

He's still masked. He doesn't take off the mask. He stands there.

He goes over to the mattress, crouches, lifts its edge up off the floor. Flattens himself on the ground and slides underneath it on his belly, lowers it down onto his back. He puts his face to one side and the gritty floor is cool under his masked cheek. He wants to close his eyes. He doesn't close his eyes.

The weight of the mattress leans into his ribs (they're healed enough), gives them just enough pressure that it's a little bit of work to breathe. Paradoxically, after a few minutes (or possibly years), that makes it easier to breathe. The mattress smells like dust and Peter's body.

He'd almost forgotten what he smells like when he doesn't also smell like Wade. Wade's smell is still coming off of his body, conspicuous because he's the only thing in here that smells like that. He isn't sure if he wants to take a shower.

He doesn't take a shower.

He used to go under the mattress like this after a bad patrol, or a Bad Brain Day. All the time. He used to spend almost as much time under the mattress as on top of it. He hasn't been doing it as much the past few years. Old habits die hard though.

He can't stay here.

He stays there for a while.

He can't stay here. He gets up, kicks the mattress back into place because it needs to sit flush against the wall when he's not underneath it. He looks at the half-full box of books, then at the rest of the apartment.

He can't stay here, either.

Stuffing a t-shirt, hoodie, and pair of jeans into his backpack, he goes back out the window, back to the wind that not so very long ago used to represent Good Things.

After a while it starts smelling like sunrise. He stops on the first roof he finds that doesn't have an access stairwell, the first roof where maybe he won't be bothered. He pulls the jeans and hoodie on over the suit, and instead of unmasking he just pulls the hood down real low, and wedges himself in a shadow against one of the water-tower girders. Folds himself up into a ball.

It's kind of quiet. He wants to stay awake and *think*.

He doesn't stay awake.



(Art by [bexorz](#) on tumblr)

Chapter End Notes

Fuck me, that whole last section was so painful to write. Like, worse than I was expecting, and I've known the whole time what was coming. It had to be done, though. I'm so sorry. It'll be ok, I promise.

Next chapter: Someone BESIDES Peter gets hurt for a change. (And by “besides” I really mean “in addition to”. Peter Parker is every universe’s punching bag. It’s basically a law of physics.)

Bus Stop Boxer

Chapter Summary

In which Peter goes feral, the plot emerges from hibernation and struggles valiantly to reassert itself despite feeling intensely disoriented and hungry after its long sleep, and the author doesn't know shit about whether this chapter is even working.

Chapter warnings: Poverty stuff, abuse of the homeless, verbal/physical homophobia, unhealthy self-talk, possible dissociation, Peter doing some terrible things, generally miserable shit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Something deep, *deep* in Peter's brain thinks maybe he's *still* misinterpreting the situation, just in a new and exciting way.

But that's only because something deep-deep in Peter's brain *always* thinks maybe he's misinterpreting the situation. Every situation. Always. Normally that suspicion is destructive, chewing away at his confidence like a rat in the foundation. This time he dismisses it as wishful thinking. Pure sick naïveté.

He knows now, and he can't un-know, and that's that. Stop thinking about it. Just stop thinking. Just accept it and stop *thinking* about it because it's *done*, mystery solved, good work Holmes.

God, his stomach hurts.

He lifts his head slowly, neck creaking all the way. Every joint between every bone in his body has that brittle, encrusted feeling, and moving is going to hurt. He hates sleeping outside. The dew gets inside of you, and the human body rusts so much faster than a car. It's not fair.

He's in no hurry to move, though. Because it'll hurt, and because there's no real reason to do so. He doesn't have to be at work (*fired*, you did something *wrong*, *you* are wrong), he doesn't have any money for Starbucks, he doesn't have anyone waiting for him, anywhere, to do anything.

There's a little thrill in that, and he giggles, knowing full well how unhinged it sounds and not caring because there's no one around to hear it. He's free!

In, you know, the stretched sense that a derailed train could be called "free".

Right now, Peter will take what he can get.

He squints up at the underbelly of the water tower. Four roosted pigeons squint back at him over their pillowed-out chests. He doesn't recognize them.

That's okay. He doesn't recognize himself, either.

Which means he has all this freedom and zero internal guidance on what to do with it.

This sucks.

The mask has collected his morning-breath in the fibers. It's foul even over the pigeon guano. He folds it back halfway — whatever kind of material this is, it doesn't stretch as far as the treated lycra he likes to use, and the edge digs into the bridge of his nose. He pushes it up onto his forehead instead and digs the crusty stuff out of his eyes. Blinks around at the midmorning sun searing the air around his shadowy water tower and tries to calculate how many hours of actual sleep he got. Not enough, that's for damn sure.

He shivers and it shakes all the rust out of his bones, and that hurts bad enough it makes him shiver all over again.

Could go back to the apartment and finish packing. It wouldn't take long. He doesn't have much.

But then once he's finished he'll have to start figuring out a way to get it all back to Queens, with no money to rent a van and no convenient friends-with-trucks. The thought makes him want to go back to sleep.

Could go back to the apartment and disinter the résumé files from wherever they're hiding in his laptop, update his work history, print out a few copies at the library, start pounding the pavement in search of HELP WANTED signs. The thought makes him want to go back to sleep *forever*.

Help wanted.

A hundred memories reach up through the murk in his brain, a hundred different voices screaming *Help!* in a hundred different ways.

Oh god, somebody please help!

Please oh god no! No, please!

Help me, Spider-Man!

He always has been better at helping *other* people.

Please secure your own air mask before helping others with theirs.

Peter scrapes his tongue between his teeth a few times and spits on the rooftop, then rolls the mask back down and smooths it out, then when all the wrinkles are gone he keeps smoothing it. One of the pigeons shuffles, stretches, flaps its wings a few times before resettling. He doesn't flap back.

Patrolling with a backpack pulled tight around his shoulders isn't as distracting as he thought it would be. The pressure's kind of a cold comfort, actually.

Patrolling in daylight is pretty weird, though. It's far from the first time he's done it but it always feels weird. The sun reflects off the colors of his suit, casts red up into his eyes. The lenses turn out to be anti-glare (on top of everything else about them that's awesome and seriously how are they this *perfect* Wade must've really and I thought we agreed not to *think* about these things, Parker, *focus*) but everything is still red-red-red.

He moves fast. People raise their phones at him when he swings low so he moves fast. To stay ahead of their shutter speeds. These are not moments he wants on record. None of them. He wonders if any of the prototype Spidey suits with control panels have settings for some kind of

stealth mode. He wonders if he could sidestep out of reality and into *The Next Generation* and broker a deal with the Romulans for their cloaking technology. Maybe they would accept superpowered DNA samples as payment.

He moves as fast as his body will let him. Not fast enough by half.

The wind feels like a partner in crime.

Irony.

He passes over a nasty-looking car crash, then comes back to it. Rips the door off one of the cars because sometimes it takes too long for people to get there with the Jaws of Life. The EMTs are happy to see him. He doesn't say anything to them. The talky portion of Spider-Man autopilot seems to be non-operational. Someone snaps a photo and Spider-Man jerks toward the camera sound, stares blankly as the shutter keeps snapping. He gets the urge to tug on his webshooter and leaves instead.

The tingles point him to an ATM. Close-range mugging, the under-the-breath kind. He lets go of the web and has a two-story freefall before he lands feet-first on the guy with the knife. His leg does not appreciate this. He feels and hears a bunch of ribs pop into pieces between his feet and the sidewalk. The person he just saved is staring down at him. He doesn't say anything to her. ATMs have security cameras. He leaves.

The tingles bring him to a back-alley drug deal just beginning to head south. Three perps, and he webs number one, smashes number two's face with a punch he's not holding back as much as he normally would, and breaks number three's arm. He doesn't say anything to them. He leaves.

The tingles lead him to a fender bender where the screaming match between the two drivers is turning upsettingly physical and oh, hi there, looks like someone has a conceal-carry permit. Spider-Man rolls his eyes, webs the gun to the ground, breaks one nose and one jaw, doesn't say anything, and leaves. A lot of phones in a lot of hands click at him.

He's hungry.

The tingles drop him on the edge of Central Park and right behind a red-faced guy shoving around his extremely pregnant probably-girlfriend. Spider-Man breaks the guy's wrist and pretty much destroys his kneecap. The scream really carries. Spidey doesn't say anything. Leaves.

He's really hungry.

The tingles show him to an on-duty beat cop smacking around a panhandler. Spider-Man throws a web at the cop, yanks her across the street and against a building (*hard*), and glues her there before she can regain the wind he knocked out of her. He doesn't say anything.

He leaves.

He's really, really hungry.

He sits on a gargoyle and stakes out somebody's roof garden. Cute little straight couple, really nice clothes, fancy jewelry on the woman. They have lots of money. They're also having a picnic.

Once their kissing has turned into making out has turned into them stumbling distractedly back inside, he swings over, hurriedly sweeps their leftovers into his backpack, and leaves. He doesn't stop until he reaches Brooklyn. Then he sticks himself under an overhang next to a bold little flock of chimney swifts, and watches the crumbs that fall from his mouth get snatched off the ground far

below by a few anonymous house sparrows.

The sunlight fades and his hands are shaking, and his breath is shaking, and his brain is shaking. He's pretty sure he's not actually perceiving all three dimensions anymore — everything looks like an extremely detailed line drawing filled in with full painful color — but he's not smashing into any buildings, so whatever. He's starting to see things moving in his periphery, little indistinct shadows that jerk and swoop and hop around and distract him. He knows they're not really there. He knows why his brain *thinks* they're there. He needs to sleep. Sleeping sounds like a really, really good idea.

He doesn't sleep.

And by now all the noise-without-reprieve is getting to him as much as the not-enough-sleep and the not-enough-food, it's all feeding off of each other and it's *getting* to him and something in the back is screaming *I can't take it anymore* but that's a lie, isn't it? It's always a lie. He can *always* keep taking it — he can always take *more* — because it's what he always ends up *doing* no matter what, isn't it? Get the meltdown over with and just keep soldiering on. Become someone extremely unpleasant, and avoid talking to people to spare them that unpleasantness, and suffer the consequences of isolation but *still get the fucking job done*. That's what matters. That's what matters.

I can't take it anymore is just a thinly veiled euphemism for *I don't WANNA*. Spider-Man is better than that. Spider-Man transcends that. This is what Spider-Man actually stands for, and Peter is *not* about to compromise that, even if nobody ever knows it but himself.

So many secrets. Peter never imagined he'd have to take his integrity to the grave.

Aunt May would have a stroke if she knew. *I swear, Peter Parker, the harder things get, the more you seem to expect of yourself. You need to take care of yourself, Peter. Slow down, Peter.*

No. He's kinda young, sure, but he's not a child. He doesn't need to be *taken care of*, by himself or anyone else. (Skipping a few meals and sleeping rough for a while isn't exactly going to kill him.) What he *needs* is to keep the hell *up* with things and put some *good* back into the world and make a fucking *contribution*.

His muscles are all reminding him in no uncertain terms that he's had very little exercise for the past few weeks. That this much activity would be too much even in peak physical condition. He grinds his jaw shut and keeps it shut. Keeps it tight. Keeps the pressure on like he's pressure-stimulating the fuck out of his *face*. If his body won't do what he wants it to do, then what good is it?

He doesn't weigh very much, so if he can't even haul his own weight, then what good is *he*?

Thwip, release, swing. Thwip, release, swing. *He wakes up in the morning, does his teeth, bite to eat and he's rolling. Never changes a thing. The week ends, the week begins.* Rhythm, rhythm, rhythm.

Things get even more flat with the darkness. City night reduces the cacophony of colors to orange and charcoal grey, with flashes of red taillights and blue gadget screens.

Against his will, his memory drums up a pin-sharp image of Wade — *Deadpool*, his memory says, so he knows it's from a while ago — sitting close by, and twisting himself around until his panda-mask is upside-down and looking up at Spider-Man like that and *You rock my four-color world*,

Spidey.

Spider-Man lands against a wall and starts pounding his forehead against the brickwork, eyes screwed shut and *no, no, NO I said I wasn't gonna* —

“Faggot!”

He looks over his shoulder. He looks down. Spidey-sense is murmuring something unintelligible. He watches.

For a moment the alley below him stays empty aside from some muffled yells, then a door bangs open (he flinches) and two guys are dragging a third one out by the shirt. The air fills with bland pop-rock and sour tavern-smell before the heavy door slams itself shut again.

“You think you can just —“

“Bitch-ass fairy, like you can —“

“Keep that shit outta my face —“

“Aw sick, man, I think he likes this —“

“You like this, faggot? Fuckin’ —“

And normally, Spider-Man would have something to *say* to testosterone-poisoned dudebros gay-bashing someone right in front of him. He'd have a *lot* of things to say. Extremely unpleasant things that would have them looking over their shoulders until they either die of heart disease or come out of the closet themselves or leave *his city* forever, but, at the end of the day still just *words*.

And they're not inflicting much physical damage on the man who apparently had the gall to, you know, be queer in their presence. Just kinda swatting him around and screaming like they're not sure what to do with him. Spidey-sense is just sort of humming absently about the whole thing.

So something way, way in the back is telling him — is *warning* him — that if this gets well and truly *violent* then that'll be on *him*.

But as he lands on the ground behind them, Peter decides not to care. It's not like talking has done him many favors lately anyway.

He telegraphs the first right hook but since the guy's back is turned it connects just fine. Peter watches him go down, and it seems to be happening in slow motion — and he's webbing the guy to the ground before he's even finished falling, and that's also in slow motion, and that's *strange* so it's got his full attention — so he doesn't even see the hit coming from the other direction. He only sees the flashbulb burst of impact against his face and feels himself reeling back.

His vision clears and he stares, jaw open.

That's not supposed to *happen*.

It doesn't even hurt, not really, but it's *not supposed to happen*. This isn't a supervillain. Not even one of the crappy little punk-ass supervillains he usually gets stuck dealing with. It's just some... some blue-collar Joe Normal on the street. Some blue-collar *drunk* who's not *supposed* to be able to nail goddamn *Spider-Man* as easily as Flash used to nail puny Parker.

Vaguely he's aware of the guy taking more swings at him, but this time Spidey-sense is doing its damn *job* and he tips back and he tips sideways and he keeps himself out of the way. Mindless reflex. How does one dodge without dodging.

Gradually — incrementally — the anger comes. With each attempted blow it dials up one more click.

Until he stops dodging, and catches the next sloppy punch in his hand. Hears a ragged growl from his own throat and hears a steady series of crunches (and a ratcheting scream) as he squeezes the captured fist.

...If anyone asks Spider-Man about this later, he'll have no idea what to tell them.

He knows that he's throwing the dudebro against the wall, that he's burying his own fist into an undefended solar plexus, that these two blows to the man's head are *too hard* and might lead to some kind of brain damage, that the knee to the pelvis is completely unnecessary, that the way he picks the guy up and throws him down to the pavement is the wrong angle for his spine and he might've just put someone in a wheelchair.

What he doesn't know is *why*.

He knows he's kicking relentlessly at the one already webbed to the ground, and he knows it isn't fair, it isn't *right* —

He knows the phrase *out of control* and he knows *this* is what that phrase means.

What he doesn't know is why. Or how to stop.

He wants to *stop*. This *isn't right*.

He hears a voice talking to him. "Easy," is the word that keeps repeating. Like a rider trying to settle a horse. "Easy, easy there."

Spider-Man keeps kicking, hears a few frantic grunts getting forced out of his own mouth from the exertion.

"Hey, c'mon man, reel it in Spidey."

But he's *not* really Spider-Man right now, is he.

"Hey man, c'mon! Take it back a notch!"

He spins toward the voice, fist cocked back.

The third man — the one he's supposed to be *saving* — flinches away. Both his hands are up. "Whoa hey easy, it's okay!" he says. "I uh... I think you got 'em."

Spider-Man looks at the fist raised next to his ear. Haha, how did that get there?

"It's okay," says the man again. "I'm okay, you're okay, it's over, right? You got 'em. It's done. ... Okay?" He's still cringing.

Peter wants to say something. To mouth off, to defuse, to *lighten* it all with some crappy pun that he didn't even know he was thinking. Under the mask, Peter opens his mouth. Nothing comes out but the smell of unbrushed teeth.

He looks at the two on the ground. They're both breathing. One of them sounds... wet.

Oh god.

Oh fuck no, *no*.

"Uh... Spider-Man? You, um. You alright?"

He leaves.

He leaves *so fucking fast*.

He has to stop along the way to buckle over in a hidden corner and dry-heave because *oh my god* he really just did that, all of that, *he hurt those people so much*.

He has to stop and dry-heave *twice*.

When he finds a quiet-enough rooftop, he doesn't sleep so much as lie on his side and sob for three hours. He's too dehydrated for tears, but since when do you need tears in order to cry? Trade secret: you totally don't.

Afterward, he's not nearly as numb as he'd like to be.

As much as Peter wants to take a massive step back until he can be *damn sure* he's got himself under control again, he can't stop patrolling. He can't stop being Spider-Man. Not for one night. (Not for one day, either, now that his calendar's gaping open.)

Can't stop doing this. For a long time it was the only thing in his life that felt worthwhile.

Now it's the only thing in his life, full stop.

Sleep is for the dead.

Doesn't feel like he'll have too long a wait.

He rationalizes. It's what he's good at.

Another day or so.

What people don't realize about superheroes, particularly the lower-level vigilante versions like himself, is that by the time they put on their masks or capes or armor for the evening, they've already had a full day of doing normal human-things. They're already just as tired as anyone else coming home on the train.

The difference is that the people on the train are looking forward to putting on some creative sexy outfit and going out to unwind somewhere, or to reacquainting themselves with their family, or to kicking back with a beer and a low-effort dinner and watching Jon Stewart. For a superhero, the most taxing and dangerous part of the day hasn't even begun yet, and they're beginning it with the

lion's share of their energy already depleted. And with their heads full of the *exact same* gripes about inept managers and asshole coworkers and demonic customers (and crappy weather, and bad traffic, and disappointing porn, and relationship issues, and screwed-up lunch orders, and existential ennui, and headaches). Deep down, they all just want to go home and eat dinner.

And this is the state that your average superhero is in *at the beginning* of patrol.

Another thing a lot of people don't realize is that fighting? Is really, *really exhausting*. Most regular-people fights last less than 45 seconds — most of those a *lot* less — not so much because one person is so much stronger or faster or better at it than the other one, but because that's how fast one of them gets too tired to carry on and gives up. (If the violence continues after that, it's no longer a fight, it's a beat-down.) There's a *reason* boxing matches have such short rounds with so many breaks in between.

And yeah, Spider-Man has super-strength and super-speed and super-reflexes and super-healing and and and. Yeah, the powers do a lot of the heavy lifting for him. But he's lifting his share of baggage at the same time. And he's already wrung out from *being human* all day. And as soon as one asshole is "brought to justice" or however you want to phrase it, he's off looking for the next one. And the act of looking takes its own toll on his energy reserves.

And he does it for *hours*. Half the night. Most of the night. Sometimes *all* night and into the morning.

When he has to go to work and be human all over again like everyone else, with either no sleep or not enough sleep.

(Okay well, he *had* to go to work. Not so much with that anymore. But he still has to be human. Frequently a neurotypical-seeming human, which in its own way is every bit as exhausting as being a motherfucking *superhero* all motherfucking night. Why yes, it *is* a fair comparison. Peter Spider-Man Parker is an expert on being both, and he *assures* you that they are equally demanding.)

Anyway.

The thing that the media — and, by extension, most people — never seem to fully *get* about superheroes is that, if you are looking at an on-duty superhero — pretty much any human or metahuman superhero, pick one out of a hat and Spider-Man will nod and say, "Yep, them too" — you are also looking at a completely wrung-out, strung-out, exhausted, stressed, probably grouchy, *human* person who is at all times thinking somewhere in the back of their mind that right now they could be at home with bare feet, watching Jon Stewart.

They just also happen to be able to punch through a brick wall, or whatever.

So yeah, there's going to be unintended property damage, and sometimes — maybe often — a criminal is going to get hit harder than intended. Pulling punches, keeping a clear head, and other forms of fine-tuned self-control require the kind of *massive* energy output that sometimes — maybe often — just isn't *possible*.

These are the things that Peter is thinking as he reads the Daily Bugle's front-page sidebar about Spider-Man through the glass window of the newspaper case outside Starbucks.

Apparently the city of New York has added six counts of assault, including felony assault of a police officer, and two more of property damage to the laundry list of official charges against Spider-Man. And that's just since the weekend.

Since Peter's no longer on staff (and would rather survive by eating his own *leg* than by offering Jameson any freelance favors), they had to run an old file photo of Spidey. An old-old one, from before Peter had figured out how sewing worked and the suit didn't fit right. His shoulders were skinnier then.

A lady drops a fiver and some change in Peter's cup. "God bless, kiddo," she says.

"Thank you," says Peter.

Looking like a "kiddo" is finally doing him some good. People are way more generous if they think you might be a minor. He doesn't disabuse them of the notion. Maybe he even tries to make himself look a little smaller.

But he does get in their faces when, alarmingly often, they drop money in his cup and then immediately yell at the older guy leaning against the wall just a few feet away. *Get a fuckin' job! I work my ass off every day...* That guy's name is Jeff and he's a two-tour vet, and even though Peter's styrofoam cup is easily twice as full as his, Jeff bought *Peter* a hot dog yesterday, about an hour after Peter sat down near him and his cardboard sign.

Peter argued with him about the hot dog until Jeff finally agreed to eat half. He would only accept the smaller half, though.

Loudly and publicly shaming the people who harass Jeff is literally the least Peter can do for a person like that.

There are, in fact, good people in the world.

Somehow, having that thought is painful more than it is reassuring.

So instead Peter refocuses his eyes (such that he can; sleeplessness or dehydration or not enough food, whatever the reason, his eyes are too tired to focus most of the time now) on the newspaper. He can't read any farther than he already has, so he just re-reads from the beginning down to where the rest of the article vanishes behind the fold in the paper.

A business-casual guy who reeks of *fresh master's degree* and is probably not much older than Peter (if at all) comes out of the Starbucks, goes up to the newspaper case and stuffs some quarters into the slot. He folds the paper over once without looking at it and passes it straight to Peter, along with a dollar. "It's easier to read if you're not squinting through dirty glass," says business-casual, already turning to go. "I was getting an eyestrain headache just looking at you. Good luck kid." He walks past Jeff without glancing at him.

Peter looks at Jeff's shoulder. Jeff's head is ducked low and he's adjusting and readjusting (and re-readjusting) his Yankees hat. Peter wants to say something to him. He doesn't say anything.

He unfolds the paper and for a minute or so all he can do is stare at the mugshot that was hiding behind the fold. Evidently it's the face of someone Spider-Man's beat up in the past few days, but even if Peter weren't faceblind he'd still have trouble recognizing anyone under the lava-flow of injuries covering the man in the picture. Bold move, Jameson, putting something that graphic on the front page.

He re-reads the article from top to bottom, follows it to the jump page on section B, page 7. It reads more like barely restrained op-ed garbage than a piece of actual reporting. (He checks the byline. Claire wrote it. Of course. Looks like someone's bucking for a raise. She'll probably get it, too, now that some funds have been freed up by kicking Peter off the payroll. Three copy editors was

always too many, and Peter had caught glimpses of post-its on Jameson's desk that contained the word "layoffs?" and since copy editors are the stomped-on omegas of the editorial department he'd known they were all being sized up for the chopping block. Really he just saved them some hassle by getting blown up and shitcanned. Such a big fucking superhero.)

The slide and clink of change going into his cup. "Thank you," he says, automatically.

He rifles through pages until he finds the crossword, folds back all the edges of the paper until the crossword is the only thing he can see, situates it on his thigh — and then realizes he doesn't have a pen.

For some reason, that's what gets to him this morning.

If he had any energy left at all he'd probably get up and kick the entire newspaper case into the street. Yes, it's bolted to the sidewalk. No, he doesn't care who sees.

But he *doesn't* have the energy for that, so instead he just spreads out his fingers and presses both palms, one stacked over the other, against the top of his head, and laughs without smiling. He sticks and unsticks his hands to his head, secretly, getting his superpower game on, right in plain sight, and nobody knows, and he laughs.

"Mikey," says Jeff. "Mikey. Hey, Mike. You alright?"

Peter told Jeff his name was Mikey.

(Sometimes the people who give him money ask what his name is, too. So they can personalize their well-wishes or whatever. Last time he was "Donnie". Before that, "Leo".)

(He's getting used to all this a lot faster than maybe he should. It's only been a few days. Maybe this is the life he was born for.)

"Yeah Jeff, of course. I'm *super*." And he keeps laughing, this time at his private, self-deprecating pun.

Jeff misunderstands in exactly the way Peter expected him to, and gets slowly to his feet, and brushes the sidewalk-debris off his ass, and goes toward the Starbucks door.

"I swear to *god* Jeff, if you come back out here and hand me food I'm going to pinch your nose and force-feed it to you."

"Sure kid, good luck with that," Jeff mutters before going inside.

He comes back with one of those really big frou-frou coffee drinks with tons of whipped cream and syrupy stuff on top, and holds it out to Peter.

"It's not food," says Jeff.

Peter glares at Jeff's chin. "That's devious," he says.

"Thanks," says Jeff, settling back down in his spot.

Caramel-flavored.

"Hey Mikey, he likes it," says Jeff with a smirk.

Peter wants to flip him off, but they only met yesterday so he's pretty sure Jeff might take it the

wrong way. (Wade would get it; he'd just laugh and make a kissy-face at him and I thought we weren't thinking about him, Parker.)

He rearranges the Bugle until it's properly folded again. "You want the paper?"

"Sure, why not." Jeff makes a face when Peter hands it over. "Ugh, the Bugle? Really?"

Peter likes Jeff.

Spidey-sense whispers at the back of his neck and he looks around, stiffening. Someone's speed-walking up the sidewalk toward him, wearing clothes that are very much not appropriate for speed-walking and looking more over his shoulder than at where he's going.

He stops in front of Peter and stuffs a couple bills into Peter's cup with frantic hands. In the process he accidentally knocks the cup over and *panics* so hard that the air fills with a sudden cloud of body odor. "Oh god oh god oh god," he keeps muttering as he rights the cup and makes sure every bill and nickel finds its way back inside. The second that's done he jumps back and spins around with both hands in the air, fingers spread wide, spins and spins, then takes off *running*.

Peter blinks, and the street goes back to normal.

Jeff drops the paper to his knees. "Whaaat the hellll...?"

"No idea," says Peter, shaking his head. He picks up the cup and stirs its contents around with a finger. "Oh my god."

"What?"

Peter leans forward to try and spot the stranger, but he's long gone.

"What?" asks Jeff.

Peter's voice is an octave too high. "That guy just gave me *two hundred bucks*."

Jeff blinks twice and blows a breath out through his mouth, ballooning out his cheeks. "*Damn*."

"I'll say." He shovels everything from the cup deep, deep into his pants pocket, pats it and re-pats it to make sure it's not falling out, and stands up. (And re-pats his pocket a few more times.)

"Come on," he says. "We're getting groceries."

Jeff tries to wave him off for a while, but Peter proves to be the more stubborn of the two.

After seeing Jeff off with as many bags of food as the man can carry, Peter goes back to the apartment, on foot. He'll need his laptop.

Before passing the newspaper over to Jeff, he'd checked the date. It's the 16th. Rent was due on the first and of course it went unpaid. He'd read the entire lease before signing, so he knows what that means, and knows when his deadline was. What he doesn't know is how long it'll be before the landlady calls someone to haul all his stuff away. If she hasn't already.

If his things are still there now, he'll need his laptop. And the materials for his Spidey stuff — most vitally, formula and ingredients for refilling his webshooters, but also the beat-up pattern pieces he uses to make new suits. It took ages to get it just right, and he doesn't need the damn repo man finding it. All the aerosol cans of special fabric-treatment stuff to make it flame-retardant and

waterproof and such can probably get left behind. But he should probably get his collection of ruined masks out of the safe, too. And his phone and charger. And his bus pass. And his *headphones*. And his toothbrush. And deodorant.

And his favorite photos of Uncle Ben and Gwen. He can take them out of the frames so they're easier to carry.

He might need an extra bag. The backpack isn't so very big. He has a duffel somewhere, he's pretty sure.

He stops in the hall outside his door and tilts his head at it. There is a distinct lack of eviction notice.

So either his crap's already in a landfill/pawn shop and someone's already signed a new lease on the place and maybe even moved in already — entirely plausible, this is New York after all, and the rent on this place is on the low end — or, maybe... the landlady hasn't gotten around to it yet for whatever reason. It's just a thin little thread of hope, but *god* does it cut into him.

Heart palpitations seem so much *bigger* in his body when he hasn't been eating.

It's hard to slot the key into place with the tremors in his hands — again, heart palpitations? Not helping.

The lock hasn't been changed yet.

The place smells even more stale than before. He was only here a few days ago but according to the air quality it's more like weeks. He half-expects to see his milk-crate furniture covered in white sheets when he flips the light switch.

It's all just as he left it. Looks like the Parker luck hasn't caught up here yet.

He throws the deadbolt and puts the chain on, lets the backpack slide off his shoulders to the floor. His back feels cold without it. He's halfway to the bathroom for one last shower when he stops.

Because the lights came on when he flipped the switch.

He *knows* he didn't pay the electric bill. It's at least twice as overdue as the rent. He further *knows* that the electric company gives you two days, maybe three tops, before shutting you off.

He scowls up at the exposed bulb in the ceiling as if it has any explanation to give.

It hums back at him, steadily growing brighter as the filament warms up.

Peter sighs. "Whatever." He tries to be quick in the shower, fully expecting the lights and water both to cut out the second his hair's full of suds. But it doesn't, and after the grime's all gone down the drain he blanks out a little, stands there feeling the warmth and breathing the steam and watching hundreds of rivers roll thoughtlessly down his body while his muscles shiver away the worst of their cramps.

The drain is always semi-clogged no matter what he tries, and when the water buildup in the tub is up to his ankles he finally turns off the tap. Neighbor's music is coming through the wall. He puts a hand on the slimy plastic shower panel, feels the bass vibrate in his palm.

His towel was never soft, and now it smells like mildew after being hung up unwashed for his three-week absence. After he's dry he exits the bathroom naked and — can't get rid of this thing

fast enough — crams the towel straight into the kitchen trash (cloud of fruit flies when he opens the lid).

Amazing how fast a place can fall apart if you just don't *use* it for a while. He regrets passing judgment on that first shithole Wade brought him to the night that —

He goes back to the bathroom, swipes the steam off the mirror, and tries to shave without looking at the bruise blooming over his cheekbone. He still can't believe that guy tagged him, and doesn't want to see proof of *anything* that happened that night.

Between his avoidant eyes and the shaking in his hands (and the fact that his last razor is dull as shit) he nicks himself more times than he did as a fumbling teenager.

Whatever. Job's done.

Blankly he rubs the blood between his fingertips until it goes sticky. Blood dries so *fast*. It's kind of a wonder that Wade's stuff isn't even more stained with —

Peter leaves the bathroom, crouches and starts pulling things off of the clean-laundry pile, tossing them one by one onto the dirty-laundry pile after a touch or an exploratory sniff. Too rough, too stiff, too brightly colored. How is it that Peter's the one with sensory issues, but Wade's the one with a well curated wardrobe of soft textures and dark colors? If they didn't wear such different sizes —

"Jesus fucking christ, Parker," he hisses as he stands and whirls away from the laundry piles.

"What is he, your new special interest? *Stop fucking thinking about him.*" He slams his hand down on the light switch as if the gesture will shut off his thoughts too.

Forget the clothes. Sleep naked. No one around to cover up for.

It's only September but his sheets haven't felt this cold since that weekend in February when the furnace gave out on the whole building. He curls up on his side under the blankets and is still shivering when he's overtaken by the dim awareness that he's already falling asleep. Man, he hasn't fallen asleep this quick since his last night at Wa—

"God fucking dammit *stop*," he whispers through gritted teeth, and then he's out.

And then he's awake but doesn't remember waking up. There's this sense that he had dreams, and that those dreams were kind of frantic, but he doesn't remember them, either.

Dawn's still a ways off, he can tell, and since he didn't even get in until the night was already half over, that means he hasn't slept any more than he would've on a rooftop. His body feels heavier than it should and too warm. Body's ready to go back to sleep and stay there for days.

Brain won't let it for even a moment.

He rolls onto the floor, legs dragging the edge of the blanket as if they don't want to let it go.

"Well this is disgraceful," he says to the apartment at large. "Also: not really what I was hoping for from my last night here."

The apartment has nothing to say for itself.

He tries to decide whether or not there's any room in him for jealousy of Wade having the (perhaps

dubious) company of the boxes, if only to crowd out the silence of such oppressive moments.

He forces himself to drop the internal debate as soon as he realizes he's having it, but his thoughts crawl straight back to Wade again, and with a sigh of defeat he drops his head back onto the floor and lets them. He's too *tired* to keep fighting this battle.

But the time-lapse movie of scattershot images, the moving mouth and the moving hands and all the quotable little soundbytes and all the red and black splashing against everything and changing the color of his entire mental *landscape*, it's... it's too much, and even after letting it run for a while, it doesn't show any sign of slowing down or making sense. It's just a big tangle and the only meaning he can derive from it is *Wade*.

And all of it, every last bit of it — it *hurts*, because it's different now. He remembers the *ease* he felt during each snapshot moment, but he can't re-create it now, can't feel it anymore.

It's all been poisoned.

What he needs is a distraction. A big one. A distraction so huge and all-encompassing there won't be any *space* left inside him for Wade.

He looks up at the cracked ceiling.

There's been a string of suicide bombers.

Yes, that'll do.

But not here. He can't think here. His reluctant legs kick off the blanket and he forces himself to stand (bears out the headrush that sweeps through him because he stood up too fast).

Think slowly, Parker.

Pack your shit, say goodbye to the place, and find someplace to sit and *think*.

An hour and a half later, he slides into a booth at an all-nighter café with a stuffed duffel and a slice of peach pie. The waitress keeps giving him looks but he can't blame her. That bruise is throbbing pretty bad and he can see the purple of it in his periphery, and the bags under his eyes are so deep it feels like the skin there has turned to weightless gauze. It's warm in here but he feels safer keeping his hood up. He's probably the picture of an abused runaway. As long as she doesn't call the cops, he doesn't care.

He made sure to pack the notebook and pens on top, and he pulls them out now, opens to a blank page. Struggles with the wire binding on the notebook to get it to lay flat — the little spirals got all bent up in transit — almost throws the whole thing across the café in frustration.

Finally gets the paper more or less smooth, clicks the pen open.

Sits there.

Shovels in a few bites of pie. Damn, it's pretty good. Feels dry in his throat because he forgot to drink any water before leaving the apartment. He orders coffee.

Clicks the pen.

Clicks the pen.

Click-click-click-click-click-click—

“Hey, you wanna maybe knock that off, kid?”

“Sorry,” says Peter.

Doesn't click the pen. Sticks the pen between his teeth and picks at the edge of his webshooter.

Eats more pie.

This is not going the way he'd hoped.

He wants to write *bombings* at the top of the page in all-caps, just to kickstart his thought process, but you never know who might glance over your shoulder, and the waitress is looking at him enough as is.

He skips the first couple lines and starts writing.

1. Eliot Landon, 46
Mr. Scragglebeard
—> *soup kitchen*

2. John Doe, ??
shattered lens
—> *homeless shelter*

3. ???
kingdom come
—> *bank corporate office*

“One of these things is not like the others,” he sings under his breath. He draws a thick line from number three to the side of the page.

any connection at all??

He draws a big box around the question, sighs through his nose, then starts mindlessly drawing more question marks in the space around the box just to keep his hand busy.

The waitress swaps out his empty plate for another slice of pie.

“Oh,” says Peter, “I didn’t—“

“Don’t worry about it,” she says, and is gone before he remembers to say thank you.

It’s really good pie.

Peter has more-than-lingering doubts about the third explosion. The target is so different from the other two, and even though he doesn’t remember much about the moments before the bomb went off, he *especially* doesn’t remember anyone else being there. It’s not much to go on — his own witness testimony here is inadmissible even to himself, and he knows it — but as of this moment, it would be just as foolhardy to mark it down as Definitely The Third Incident as it would be to dismiss it out of hand.

He scratches out the 3 and replaces it with 2 1/2 and throws in a few more question marks for good measure.

Incomplete data. His kryptonite.

He flips to a new page, fights the crinkled paper into submission again until it lays flat, and with a weighted sigh writes *OPTIONS* at the top. Underlines it. Underlines it again. Draws a box around it. Just keep your hand moving and your thoughts will keep pace.

1. Check media/police reports from past 3(?) weeks
2. Text Bruce + see if EMH found anything — also ask if any REMAINS found in bank
**ONLY if non-super reports prove fruitless!!
3. Track down Landon's family/friends, see what they know
4. Track down witnesses mentioned in reports/articles, “
5. Go all Rorschach-from-Watchmen + rough up sketchy people at random in hopes they'll know something useful
6. Cross fingers + wish real hard
7. Ask Wade for h

He crosses off the last line. Then keeps scribbling his pen over the letters until they're just a big ugly splotch in the middle of the page. Then the pen tip rips through the paper, and he throws the pen on the table and sweeps the whole notebook aside, rattling it against the condiment tray.

Peter folds one arm on the table and drops his face down into the crook of his elbow because he doesn't want to see *anything*. Tries to focus on his breathing, which became erratic while he wasn't paying attention to it. Wade would *absolutely* help him with this mystery. He's literally never refused Peter help with anything, whether Peter asked for the help or not.

Of course, says Peter's brain. *And now you know why that is.*

Well Peter's not going to play along with that anymore. It feels like... like *prostitution*, almost — and he knows that's not a fair or entirely accurate comparison and he's completely in favor of rights and protections for sex workers so he doesn't mean it in a denigrating way at all, but — at the end of the day it's just plain not something he wants to *do*.

He's on his own. As per usual.

At least he's used to it.

Sitting here with his face buried isn't going to resolve anything. With a *lot* more willpower than should be necessary for such a task, he lifts his head. But he can't lift it very far, and hunches over the table with a lot of weight on his elbows. He drinks his burned coffee. He eats his pie. His eyes do *not* water. No they do *not*.

He slides the notebook back in front of him but all he can look at is the big shredded splotch of ink. He picks up the pen.

Clicks the pen.

Puts the pen back down, and puts his head back down, on top of the notebook this time. Breathes in that musky smell of ballpoint ink.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Not the waitress. A male voice he doesn't recognize, soft and polite and with a slight lisp. Busboy, maybe.

“Sir?”

Peter hums, noncommittally.

“Would you mind terribly if I joined you?”

Yes. Yes I would mind. Puzzling, he lifts his head and scowls around at the many, many empty booths. Then looks sideways at a pale blue button-down and khakis with no belt. “Why?” he asks the shirt-and-khakis.

The shirt moves in the way that Peter knows means the person wearing it is shrugging. “No particular reason. I just thought you looked like maybe you could use some company.”

Not yours, creep. Peter sits up and sweeps the notebook into his lap with one motion, covers it with a forearm just in case, then lifts his chin at the seat opposite. “It’s an ostensibly free country,” he says.

That gets a gentle chuckle for some reason. “But would it be alright with *you*?”

No. “Yes,” says Peter.

The stranger slides in. A greying beard, poorly kept. A nearly lipless mouth hiding among all the hair, smiling in what might be a rehearsed way. He settles in with a sigh of satisfaction, looks Peter over for a few seconds, then offers a hand across the table. “I’m Drew,” he says.

“Mikey,” says Peter, shaking it. (Handshakes are always okay, because they’re unsurprising and brief and have a clear beginning-middle-end.) When he gets his hand back he starts dragging his fingernail over the bent wires of the notebook in his lap. It makes a noise, an annoying one, but Drew doesn’t react to it.

“You look like you have a story,” says Drew.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Of course. But it’s just you and me sitting here right now.”

Peter’s not sure what to say about that. So he grunts.

Drew sighs and leans back, drapes an arm over the back of his bench. “I was pretty low once, myself,” says Drew. “Lost everything when the economy tanked in oh-eight. House, car, retirement savings, everything. Started fighting with Linda, until I lost her, too. The kids blamed me, and, eh, they were right. They haven’t returned any of my calls in six years. I have a granddaughter now I’ve never even met.

“I spent some time sleeping in doorways. You know. Eating out of dumpsters, then getting sick from food poisoning. Stood in line for shelter beds, until one time I... had a bad experience there. Wasn’t so eager to go to shelters after that. Hah — I even did that thing, I lived out the stereotype — begged enough to buy a couple fifths of Jack and slammed ‘em both in two or three minutes flat, not a bite of food in my stomach.

“And you can go ahead and judge me if you want to, y’know. I almost never drink, Mikey, barely ever touched the stuff my whole life, swear on my mother’s grave. To this day I’m still not entirely sure what I was thinking when I did that, but if I’m honest — can I be honest with you for a second? — to be honest I think I was just trying not to feel anything anymore. At all. Ever again. Next thing I remember I was sneaking out of the hospital — I didn’t have insurance anymore, y’know? Didn’t want to risk them tracking down Linda to pay the bill. It was... yeah, I tell ya Mikey, I was real low. Real, real low.”

Peter creases his eyebrows and scrapes the notebook-wire and tries to ignore the pain rising in his

gut for Drew and Linda and the unnamed kids and granddaughter. Just because he's not sure *where* he's being led doesn't mean he's not fully aware that he's *being* led. The story sounds as real as anything, is probably true, but it also sounds like a sales pitch. "And *then* you found Jesus," he mutters.

Drew laughs. "Hell no," he says, waving the hand that's still dangling from the back of the bench. "Religion never did a damn thing for me and I wouldn't expect it to now."

Peter looks up.

"Oh — not that there's anything wrong with that," says Drew. "I mean, it seems to work great for a lot of folks, and I say more power to them. It's just not for me, that's all I meant. And it's definitely not what helped me turn myself around in the end."

Peter stares steadily at the beard, waiting for Drew to break out the sample cases, because this is the part where he's supposed to go into detail about what *did* help him turn himself around.

"What about you, Mikey?" he says instead. "What's your story?"

So that's how he wants to play it, then. Fabricate some kind of personal connection and then tailor-fit the pitch so it's *extra* manipulative. Peter's tempted to Bad Manners the guy away, but curiosity's got him now, and anyway it's not like he's been making much progress trying to work through the issues actually at hand. He thumbs the bruises on his knuckles and tries to decide what "Mikey's" story is.

Drew leans toward the counter, where the waitress has been rearranging pastries in the display case, and asks for a grilled cheese. When she brings it, Drew pushes the plate toward Peter.

"It's okay, y'know," he says. "Talking can be hard sometimes. Tell you what, though." Drew leans sideways and pulls something out of his back pocket. A pamphlet, printed on cheap paper but in full color. He sets it on the table and slides it so that its edge is tucked under the plate of untouched grilled cheese, and taps the pamphlet twice with his finger. "This is a really good place to go if you ever do feel like to want to talk. But you could also go and just listen. It's really low-pressure, you wouldn't have to say anything if you don't want. Sometimes it's good just to hear other people's stories. You know? Maybe feel like you're not the only one, because you're not." He slides out of the booth. "It doesn't cost anything, and there's no religious affiliation. Plus the coffee cake is to die for. It was nice meeting you, Mikey."

Peter waits until Drew's gone out the door, then slides the pamphlet out with one fingertip and looks down at it. A few photographed faces smile back up at him. All men. All caucasian. One of them has a beard.

He studies the beard.

It looks like something from inside a shower drain.

He looks at it for a long, long time. Until he feels *sure*. Not 100%, but at least 80%, which is as sure as he could hope to be.

Spider-Man lays the pamphlet across the OPTIONS page of his notebook, clicks the pen. Writes a number one at the top of the pamphlet, then draws a big, heavy-lined box around the number. Puts a few exclamation points around the box. Then he closes the notebook around it, puts it back in his duffel, and starts in on the cold grilled cheese.

Okay I'm... *really* not confident about this chapter. POSTING ANYWAY LOL

Before you chime in with complaints about Peter getting violent, I'd like to point out a couple things:

1. Remember that canon Peter is more than capable of using his powers to vent his emotions at other people's expense. Not *often*, but it's been done.
2. Spectrum Peter is currently suffering malnourishment, hardcore sleep deprivation, and physical/emotional stress beyond reason (including loss of job, home, and main source of emotional support). Any *one* of these factors will cause cognitive difficulties for any human being on earth, particularly in terms of *judgment* and *mood regulation*. All of these factors at the same time? That turns you into a human landmine, dare I say *inevitably*. If Peter somehow magically maintained perfect self-control through all of that, just for the sake of continuing to be an endearing woobie, the story would be Wrong. (And the alternative response he could've had — complete breakdown and withdrawal — would've brought the story to a grinding halt, and we can't have that now, can we.)

Point is, if you're in that kind of state and are out fighting people anyway, you're gonna screw up one way or another, even if you're Spider-Man.

Aaaaand... as for all the staring-blankly-at-things-and-not-knowing-what-to-do that went on in this chapter... a big part of me wanted to blow right past a lot of this. But that urge mostly stemmed from emotional cowardice on my part, and some *~writerly instinct™~* told me it was Important to the story to spend some time directly dealing with that kind of moment-to-moment agony of figuring out what to *do* after the entire earth seems to have fallen out from under you, so... I hope it was the correct choice. And not too boring, heh.

Next chapter: More Deadpool, and Peter falls in with a bad crowd.

Love of the Loveless

Chapter Summary

In which Wade understands even less than he thinks he does (which is really saying something), Peter finds a questionable place to sleep at night, and the author doesn't know shit about cults because his research led him exactly NOWHERE.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the long wait, babes. I know that was kind of a cruel place to leave you hanging for a while, but my brain scattered to the wind, and the next two or three chapters make for some really tricky writing that requires a level of focus that's been a struggle and a half to muster up. I'm not sure I can write them the way I *want* to, but I think there's still a chance, and as long as I have that hope I'm gonna try to be extra careful. Which probably means slow updates. :/

Oh, hey!

Did you see [this beautiful amazing piece of art](#) that [SuisOu](#) did based on this fic that shredded my feelings in the best possible way?

AAAND did you see [this fluffy, happy, FLUFFY Autistic!Peter fic](#) that AGlassRoseNeverFades is doing?

Well you should.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wade's hindbrain knows the limping barefoot shuffle of Petey's feet, so his guns stay holstered on the floor when the soft noise wakes him up.

Instead of heading down the hall toward the bathroom, the feet move around the living room for a while. He hears Petey grab something from his boxes of crap and retreat back to the bedroom. Probably has insomnia again, bored and looking for something to do.

[Poor bab. WE could give him something to do... like, y'know, US...]

{Ugh, give it up, moron.}

Wade stifles a groan. *I remember when you were just another voice in my head. When did you become the voice of my DICK?*

[Hey man, I have layers.]

{It was probably around the time Shortbus ditched the pirate patch and we finally got to see what he looks like when he's NOT pounded into hamburger.}

[Now I wanna see what he looks like when he IS pounded in a much more fun way.]

{Yeah, yeah. Shine on, you crazy diamond. Can we go back to sleep now?}

Not a terrible idea. Wade never realized how steady a sleep schedule he actually used to have before he started timing himself around whether or not Petey was awake. And Petey reliably zonks out whenever he's drugged, night or day, and is reliably awake every other fucking time of night or day. Gotta catch them Z's where you can.

But —

But he won't wake us up if he needs something, he thinks.

{Ok, yeah... yeah, the whole thing with the bucket was kinda... upsetting. I see your point.}

[So let's get in there and let him know we're already awake too! Slumber party with Petey! Let's put him in a teddy! And find out what his favorite boy band is! Oo! Oo! Maybe he'll let us paint his toenails!]

{Turn off the exclamation points, bro. You're gonna poke someone's eye out with those things.}

[I WILL NOT BE CONTAINED! Stop crushing my dreams! Help! I'm being oppressed!]

Then they both pause to listen when Petey comes back out again and just stands there. Wade can hear Petey's breath. Which, correct him if he's wrong, but isn't that sorta not-very-typical? Petey's a quiet breather.

{What the hell is he doing? Sleepwalking?}

[Sit. Up. And. Ask him.]

Wade stays put, and Petey goes into the kitchen.

[Ah yes, eating because you're bored. The American way.]

{At least he's EATING.}

No, Wade thinks as he listens to a drawer open and paper rustle. *He's not.*

The boxes perform some kind of... gesture... that feels like the equivalent of a headtilt. They've started doing that lately. Something they picked up from Petey.

A sheet of paper gets torn off the notepad, and Wade can't hold his curiosity anymore. He slits his eyes open just far enough to see a blurry version of Spidey laying the paper on the counter.

[Why's he masked?]

{Oh my &\$\$&ing god, he's not gonna try to PATROL yet, is he?!}

[STOP HIM!!]

{Yeah no seriously, you can't let this happen.}

[NOW can we throw him in the closet?!]

Wade stays put, held down by the sudden weight sinking into his stomach. Something's really, really *off* about the hunched way Petey's holding himself, the way he keeps pausing every few steps and looking at the walls. This is not pre-patrol Spidey. Pre-patrol Spidey is happy and adorable and happy and confident and happy and playful and *happy*. This Spidey is... not that.

...Is leaving a note.

...Oh.

Oh.

Fucknuggets.

{Oh christ, no... Not yet.}

[Wait, so... what's he doing?]

{Leaving us. Duh.}

[What? Why?!]

{...Duh.}

Spidey shuffles past Wade's field of vision. Wade doesn't turn his head to watch. Let Petey think he's asleep. People don't steal away in the middle of the fucking night if they wanna talk things over first.

This way saves 'em both the bullshit.

[Oh my god GET UP. He walks out that door, he's never coming back!]

We stop him from leaving, thinks Wade, *and we're no better than Stark*. He closes his eyes when he hears the door open, and doesn't *hold his breath*, exactly, just... he exhales and then is too tired to inhale again.

The door closes.

[For &*\$'s sake, go the hell after him! Even YOU'RE not this stupid!]

Wade inhales, and throws an elbow across his eyes. "See ya, baby boy."

[\$* #&@ing #&*(@ to your MOTHER you #&@ piece of &@(*!!!]

{For &(#\$'s sake, would you at least check the \$#&(ing note before this moron pops a blood vessel?}*

"Fine." He rolls off the couch, footfalls quiet in case Petey's still close enough to hear him through the wall. Starts to turn on a light, then decides against it in case Petey sees the light on through the window. Grabs for his phone and pokes around the stupid thing until he finds the flashlight function.

Petey has weirdly neat 'n' tidy handwriting.

{He would.}

Wade smashes the paper in his fist. "This doesn't explain a *fucking thing*," he says.

{That's... not like him.}

“I know, right?! He’s supposed to explain every last fucking *particle* of thought in extreme detail and at *length*.”

[*snrk* You said “length”.]

{Since when do you need an explanation for someone getting the hell away from you?}

[A moment of silence for Shortbus’ dearly departed stupidity. It was nice while it lasted.]

He kinda wants to start pacing, but can’t seem to remember how legs work. “But that’s not all, is it,” he says, and he can hear that uncomfortable spark of hope in his own voice and *oh hell the fuck no* he is NOT that pathetic.

[What's not all?]

“I mean that ain’t the only reason he up and left,” says Wade, and as he says it, he realizes that he’s goddamn *right*. “For serious, somethin’ really *really* doesn’t smell right.”

[Smell? Huh? Is the bucket back?]

“It’s not like I *did* anything! Usually there’s, whatsit, an inciting event, or something. Usually I *fuck up*. But nothing even happened and he’s still all, like, hunchbacking around like he’s scared or something and taking off like...”

{Nah. Maybe he just had an epiphany.}

[Gesundheit.]

{It must’ve been, like, a shower thought, y’know? Just, boom. “Gee I wonder what’s in the fridge and — oh wait I should get the hell away from this guy. Duh.”}

“I’m *tellin’* you fuckers, something’s *wrong*.”

{Prove it, blowhard.}

He lays the crumpled paper down and smooths it out against the counter, half expecting there to be more words on it somewhere.

[Maybe he wrote the rest in lemon juice, like Nancy Drew.]

{We don’t have lemon juice.}

Wade stares straight through the note, into nothing. “There’s — there’s gotta be something,” he mutters, and hell no his voice did *not* just break. He clears his throat. “Something I haven’t picked up on yet,” he says, louder.

{Eat all your vegetables and wish real hard.}

[He wised up. End of story.]

“No. No way. Not ‘end of story’. Can’t be. We still got like ten more chapters after this.”

{You never know with these things.}

[You never know anything. You've been an idiot your whole life.]

{There's nothing to read into here.}

“But he was doing so *good* — we were doing so good, it was goin' so...”

[If wishes were fishes!]

“...That can't be *it*.”

{Oh but it is.}

[It totally is.]

He sinks to the floor. Ugh, fuck, it still smells like bleach.

{Oh for crying out... Get the \$\$ up, dude. You're embarrassing yourself.}

“That *can't* be it.”

{This is downright shameful.}

[You have brought dishonor to this family!]

They carry on like that a while. Wade lets them. Haha, “lets them”, as if they're only here on his good graces.

They both have kinda short attention spans, though. They get bored with explicitly bludgeoning him and settle down after a minute. (Hour. Whatever.)

{If I were at all inclined to be consistent, I'd say you should be celebrating the fact that Shortbus is finally doing something that's GOOD for him.}

“That's a thinly veiled ‘toldja so’ if I ever heard one,” says Wade.

{Please. There'd be no point.}

[Half the fun of changing our tune every four seconds is that no matter what happens, we can ALWAYS say toldja so.]

{So ACTUALLY saying it is kinda gauche.}

[We do have SOME standards.]

“No you don't.” Wade scratches the back of his head even though it's not itchy. Keeps scratching. Feels blood lubing up his nails. Keeps scratching.

[Uh... whatcha doin' there, chief?]

“Thinking. Duh.”

[Why start now?]

“I need a what-to-do-next.”

{Ohhh wait, I see what's going on. This is the part where the story usually goes one of two ways:

are you gonna storm away from this whole shitshow in a juvenile display of hurt feelings and go on yet another COMPLETELY AND TOTALLY UNRELATED murder/suicide binge, or are you gonna start creepin' on him and meddling in his life from a safe distance because you can't move on for shit?}

[Decisions, decisions.]

“Uh. What’s behind door number three?”

{The writer guy, being too wrung out to come up with anything better, and consequently abandoning the story.}

[Sooo... basically suicide.]

{I'm voting for Not Suicide.}

[Yeah, me too. I guess.]

{Even the story outline is on Team Not Suicide.}

[Wait, what? THAT loser gets a say in things? Since when?! Is it too late to change my vote?]

“Yep,” says Wade.

{It's too late for a lot of things...}

“Stop being poignant, I’m trying to *not* have a moment here.”

{Way too late for THAT, too.}

[So...?]

Wade claps his hands, rubs them together. (Oh, ew. That’s a lot more blood and scalp than he wanted to see.) “Stalking it is!” he says. He sighs and smiles tight-lipped into the dark for a few seconds.

[Riiight. You’re not upset at ALL.]

{Brave face.}

He holds the smile for three more seconds. Then lurches over and pukes on the floor.

If there’s one thing that stays the same about baby boy, whether he’s being Spidey or Petey, it’s that he’s a creature of habit. As stupidly huge as New York is, he’s gonna hang out in the same areas he always does. Spidey’s territory is bigger, but Wade is... persistent, and he’s had that territory mapped for a couple years now.

[Wonder that Shortbus is still alive.]

{It's a good thing we've always liked him too much to take any of those hits on him.}

[You think he knows how much money we’ve turned down for his sake over the years?]

{HE MUST NEVER KNOW.}

[I dunno, it's kinda romantic...]

Deadpool's not surprised to find that Petey's territory sits more or less in the bullseye *center* of Spidey's, but he is a little bit disappointed, not gonna lie.

If he *really* didn't wanna be found, he'd have gone somewhere else. Literally anywhere else.

{They ain't kiddin' when they call him the world's dumbest genius.}

[Shut up!]

If he *really* didn't wanna be found, he's smart enough to make that happen. Or at least smart enough to make it even a little bit of a challenge. So he must want this? At least on *some* sick level.

{Keep tellin' yourself that, champ.}

[Pretty sure NOBODY wants to be seen like — like THAT.]

{Not by anyone they KNOW, that's for #@% sure.}

Okay, so maybe Petey probably doesn't actually want Wade creepin' on him from the corner across the street while he sits on the ground outside Starbucks and looks like crap and panhandles.

[Why's he doing that, anyway? And who the hell put that bruise on him?]

{Find them. End them.}

"Pretty sure he already took care of that himself, if the news is anything to go by," says Wade.

[And why does he look as rough as every other dingus who has to sleep outside? It's not like he doesn't have anyplace to go.]

{We did pay his rent. Didn't we? We didn't hallucinate that?}

[Our hallucinations aren't that boring.]

{Did that old &!\$@# take our money and evict him anyway?!}

[END HER.]

Wade folds his arms with a grunt and leans sideways against the corner. "We can go back sniffin' around and figure that shit out," he says, "but later. Right now we gotta figure THIS shit out." Because one thing's for damn sure: Petey and his sense-of-something-to-prove wouldn't be out *begging* unless things really were that dire.

And Petey *knows* he can come to Wade for help. He won't *want* to, because he's Petey — but also no, he *should* be bringing his problems to Wade before bringing them to the masses, *because he's Petey*, and *Petey* labors under the lifelong delusion that regular New York schmucks are hapless little kittens who need to be pulled out of trees. *Petey* likes to haul around the weight of the world so much that he mistakes it for his own weight, doesn't even realize how underfed he is underneath all that muscle-strain. Doesn't want to lay that on anyone else, especially those oh-so-delicate asshole civilians.

Petey ain't just begging for spare change, he's begging for another guilt trip. Which is so fucking OOC it makes Wade's eyes cross.

And Wade's trying *so* fucking hard not to jump to conclusions here, but *that* is not making it easy.

Nothing about that is easy to look at.

"See? I *told* you there's more goin' on here!" He waves at the disgrace across the street. "You wanted proof? There's your proof. Right fuckin' there."

{Proof of WHAT, man? That he'd rather be a bum than stick around a sick \$&%# like you?}

"That something about this whole sitch is fucked seven ways to September."

{You're overthinking this.}

[Thinking's not really your strong suit, big guy.]

{Denial and pining over a lost cause, on the other hand...}

[And not knowing how to take "screw off" for an answer.]

{And repeatedly throwing yourself into a meat grinder for anyone who gives you so much as a "Hey, how's it going."}

[So pathetic.]

{SO goddamn pathetic.}

Wade tightens a fist around the handle of the Desert Eagle until his knuckles crack. Then he deflates.

"Yeah, okay," he says.

[Wha... huh? You're agreeing with us?]

{You realize of course that now we have to change our answer.}

[Wabbit season!]

{Duck season!}

"Not talkin' about *that*, okay," says Wade. "Something's up with Spidey. Something *seriously* up. I mean *look* at him."

{Dude, you're the one with the eyes. We're already looking.}

[And mentally undressing him.]

{Not the time, bro.}

The rumors that there's a Spidey impostor dickin' around town can't mean anything good, either. Wade knows damn well it's the same Spidey as always, but if he's so far off his game that people don't even *recognize* him anymore...

If he's so fucked up from... from *whatever* the hell he's fucked up about this time...

{And people think WE'RE hard to figure out.}

...the fresh shiner on his face could just be the beginning.

{And that is simply not acceptable.}

Wade punches the wall he's leaning against, just as hard as he goddamn *wants* to punch it, then barely listens as his shattered metacarpals snap back into place. Pringle-snapping ferret-licking course-correction cilantro-sucking popsicle stick—

{Were there any actual swear words in there?}

—why does seeing him like this hurt so much worse than *watching him leave*?

[This is so \$&@#ed up.]

“Word.”

{So like, I GET why he wouldn't wanna stay with us. Even I don't wanna stay with us. But why's he out HERE?}

Wade squeezes the bridge of his nose with his unbroken hand. “I’m open to theories,” he says.

[...Does he even realize he still has an apartment?]

Wade squints. “We’ve seen him in those shoes before. Those are his. He had to’ve gone back there to get ‘em. And he would’ve seen the place is still there.”

[So why the hell isn't he sleeping there?! That's what crappy no-bedroom dumps are FOR.]

{Maybe he's scared to?}

[Why the \$#%@ would he—]

{He could think it's still compromised, could have a shitty neighbor, could have bedbugs, could be trying to avoid... visitors...}

[Dingdingding!]

“I call bullshit,” says Wade.

{Don't underestimate the lengths people will go to to avoid you, big guy.}

He hums in thought. “It’s not like I ever showed up at his place before,” says Wade. “Not while he was there, anyway. He got no reason to expect me to show up now. Also he *totally* knows that if I wanna stalk him I’ll find a way to do it no matter what—”

{Case in point.}

“—and him hobo-ing around ain’t gonna stop me, ‘specially if he’s gonna do it in the same neighborhood as always. He got nothin’ to lose by sleeping in his own fucking bed.”

{And yet, he's not.}

[Toldja we shoulda stocked up his fridge while we were at it. He follows food around like a \$&*#ing labrador.]

{He's even worse than you about that, big guy.}

“Yeah, ‘cause THAT wouldn’t have scared him off from the place.”

{Y’know, I can’t help noticing...}

“Hm.”

{You’re kinda falling behind on your wallowing schedule. The active-self-hatred meter is in the red.}

“Busy.”

[Damn right, big guy. This Shortbus thing ain’t gonna figure itself out.]

“Thank you.”

[And that stupid coffee cup he’s got ain’t gonna fill itself.]

Wade lifts an eyebrow. “Lightbulllb!”

The first jackass he can grab is also the most convenient, because... okay, because it’s the first one he can grab. That’s pretty much it.

The D-Eagle has never been especially practical — all shine with more than a hint of overkill, so really all the things Wade loves in a sidearm, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t know there are technically better tools for, like, every job, ever — but it’s kinda perfect when all you wanna do is make sure the first jackass you can grab is more afraid of getting plugged than he is greedy for the Benjis you shove in his clammy hands.

Jackass is obedient to the fear, but is *not* subtle as he makes the drop. Wade considers shooting him anyway, just for being a dumbass.

{Baby boy thinks not-murder is better than murder.}

Wade does not shoot the jackass.

Then he grins his own jackass-ish kind of grin at the look on Petey’s face when he realizes what just landed in his cup.

The grin goes away again when Petey takes his scruffy hobo-buddy to the store with him.

[Should we be jealous? I’m kinda feelin’ a little jealous here.]

“Such a *fucking* do-gooder,” Wade mutters.

{Yeah, a do-gooder who put half a dozen people in the hospital on Friday.}

[He’s so our type.]

“That’s not exactly his jam, though.”

[No, but he still DID it. He also bench-presses TRUCKS. Woof.]

{Down boy.}

[Just sayin’.]

“Well don’t.” He crams his fists in his pockets and starts walking. “Time to go see an old bird about an apartment that better fucking have all of Petey’s stuff still in it.”

[Hah. Bird. ‘Cause of Shortbus. I see what you did there.]

{See what, exactly?}

[The... the joke?]

{“Joke”? Don’t hallucinate without the rest of us.}

Peter has enough money now to take a cab, but that just seems like a waste. Also, even though the walk takes all night and well into midmorning — he has to stop sometimes to rest his leg, then keeps limping on even though it still hurts, because what else is he going to do — there’s something narcissistically appealing about approaching on foot. The sleep deprivation is probably a contributing factor but he still feels like a battered old cowboy who lost his horse but is still going to defeat the gunslinger and save the town that he’s walking into.

Clint Eastwood never came to town because someone handed him promotional literature full of typos, whispers his brain.

They run their outfit out of what used to be an old hotel — *a really* old hotel — the building now registered on some kind of historical directory preventing its demolition. It’s situated in the part of Hell’s Kitchen that isn’t sure yet of how gentrified it wants to be, so the neighbors are an odd mix of hipsters, blue collars, and clumps of people who make Spidey-sense sit up and take notice.

The neighbors mostly avoid the old hotel, though. It’s too sketchy for the hipsters, too well lit for the bangers, too *inhabited* for architecture photographers or curious teenagers, and just plain uninteresting to the rest. It’s so perfect for hiding in plain sight, he wouldn’t be surprised to learn that the hotel was there first, and the neighborhood designed itself around it.

Peter knocks on the door a few times before cautiously opening it and letting himself in, calling out hellos through the foyer.

They show Peter to a bed, and for the first three days they allow him to eat and sleep and that it, until he feels almost like a human again. Spidey-sense sits on the edge of the mattress like a guard dog and never quite falls asleep, but it never sounds a real alarm, either, except that once when one of the guys accidentally knocks a water glass off the table and it nearly shatters on Peter’s foot.

Then his three free days are up, and Hugh — he runs the “house” — tells him that this isn’t a homeless shelter, and starts showing him how things work.

The Bootstrap Brotherhood works like this:

First and foremost, they are all very polite. Even the ones for whom it doesn’t seem to come naturally. They are at all times perfect shining examples of that Jehovah’s witness type of polite. Smiling, conciliatory, masking disappointment, and probably keenly aware of the pamphlets in their back pockets even when they don’t have any actual pamphlets.

Peter follows the good-manners script down to the letter. The Brothers all seem to like that.

Some of the Brothers are big, or have face-tattoos. Some of them don’t but still make Spidey-sense crawl with the same kind of feeling Peter gets during the second half of most Hitchcock movies.

They are all very, very polite.

The daily schedule is strict, but oddly relaxed. There are clocks everywhere, most of them analog. The arrhythmic ticking takes hold of his attention and slows him down, physically and mentally. The sound quickly morphs from distracting to soporific. He stares at all the clock-faces and waits for them to parse. Occasionally the ticking is so all-encompassing that he can't actually read the time, but nobody makes fun of him when he stops them to ask what time it is even though there's a clock right there. Very polite. So polite.

Breakfast and dinner are eaten communally at 7am and 7pm respectively. There's no menu freedom. Whoever's on kitchen rotation cooks whatever they're told to cook (a somewhat bossy ex-con named Greg is in charge of everything kitchen-related) and whoever's on service rotation does up your plate for you. You take your plate and sit wherever you want at one of the big folding tables with the metal folding chairs in the dining room, which as far as Peter can tell was actually the banquet hall back when the house was a hotel.

Before you can eat, there's three or four minutes of chanting.

They don't call it chanting — they don't call it anything, it's just what they do — but it's pretty much chanting.

The Brothers mumble the words into their chests like reluctant dinner-guests at someone else's Thanksgiving feeling obligated to do "Our Father who art," but the words don't seem particularly prayerful. Peter honestly can't make out most of the words because the chanting is out of sync and coming from too many different sources and it's like trying to hear someone over speaker-phone, with bad reception, while on a packed Greyhound bus, which happens to be zooming along the interstate. So he just sits and tries to keep his hands still, and that seems to be good enough for them.

Before dinner, after the chanting, someone gives a lecture. Someone who's in charge of something. Hugh who's in charge of the house, Greg who's in charge of the kitchen, Drew who's in charge of construction, Robert who's in charge of cleaning and maintenance, Allen who's in charge of PR and communications. Allen is the best at putting words together, but Drew is the best at speaking clearly and holding people's attention.

They all like to talk about self-reliance, and they all like to talk about how harsh Society is — Society seems to be the big bad here, and warrants capitalization — and how important it is to do your part and not take handouts. How handouts and "the welfare state" are symptomatic of the unnamed disease afflicting Society. How Society is like the family dog succumbing to the early stages of rabies, and how people let it bite them because they still love the dog. And they also like to talk about security, and having trust in the Brotherhood, because trusting the Brotherhood is somehow the same as trusting yourself, and you can only ever trust yourself, except you also *have* to trust the Brotherhood, because the Brotherhood is an extension of yourself, and...

It never makes any more sense than that. Peter tries to follow, he tries *so hard*, but there is no thread of logic there to grasp.

But the listening Brothers pay attention to the lectures, and nod along every so often, and after a while Peter just starts doing the same thing, because if there's anything he can count on these people to appreciate, it's sameness.

Not the nebulous, unspoken, and largely inaccessible sameness that the world at large tries to enforce. Just rote mirroring, and adherence to the rules. Compliance is a shallow effort, and easy enough.

So breakfast and dinner are always the same. One day Peter finds that he's come to rely on that particular sameness, that it's been anchoring him, and that he doesn't mind.

Lunch is a free-for-all because it happens in the middle of chores.

Most of the day is chores. They go in rotations, daily assignments get posted, and although it's nerve-wracking not knowing what tomorrow will look like until the master list gets taped to the wall during breakfast each day, Peter soon finds that none of the chores are particularly strenuous. Mostly it's cleaning, tending the vegetable garden that surrounds the house on three sides, going with several other people to the grocery store or hardware store or copy shop with an exacting list of what-to-do, what-to-buy, occasionally what-to-say. Peter never has to do the talking. Never has to take point.

Never runs into a situation for which the Brothers don't have a script ready to go, and if he hasn't learned the lines yet, he can just stand there and shred his shirt-hem with his fingernails while someone else recites them.

It's an easy way to live.

Also — and although this is only a perk, it is still extremely freaking important and worth more than a passing mention — there's a bed for him, and three free meals a day.

The bed is a bunkbed, the extra-long kind like they had in college. Peter's is on the bottom. He's fine with that. If anything it's too high off the ground; mattress-on-the-floor has been his preferred sleeping arrangement since he was fourteen and Aunt May finally deemed him old enough to make his own furniture choices.

New guys sleep four to a room on the top floor. More established members are two to a room and are made to deal with fewer stairs. Every stair in the place has its own signature creak. Everything is wood, even the paneling on the walls. Old stuff, antique and stained and struggling to offgas secondhand smoke from decades and decades ago. The halls are carpeted in dark red, and the carpets all smell like a church.

There are two communal bathrooms to a floor. These are all tiled in black and white, with wood-paneled ceilings and clawfoot tubs and sputtering showerheads. The toilets all clog with every other use. Above every toilet is a handwritten sign taped to the wall: YOU PLUG IT, YOU PLUNGE IT. Above every porcelain sink is a handwritten sign taped beside the mirror: WIPE SINK AFTER EVERY USE.

There are handwritten signs taped pretty much everywhere in the place.

The basement, he learns, floods regularly. Sometimes, when he's on the ground floor, he can smell the inevitable must rising up. He finds he likes the idea of living on a foundation that has its own odor. It's not pleasant, but it is... grounding.

The politeness and the all-caps handwritten rules and the by-the-clock-ness of their lives here, it's... all of it is grounding.

Even the creepy chanting, which Peter starts to join in with, stumbling over the few words he can actually parse. He does it, and he likes it, if only because it's socially encouraged echolalia. It's still creepy, but it still stands rocklike at predetermined points throughout his day, a handrail for him to lean on while he regains his footing.

His healing starts to get back up to something resembling normal speed. The bruises fade, the scabs

fall away and the new red skin underneath starts to keloid. His leg complains less and less under his weight — his weight increases, he can tell when he looks at his wrists and they're not as bony as usual — until eventually there are no more injuries for his body to complain about.

In their absence he finally notices that the scar on his left eyelid has thickened. He can feel it folding when he opens his eyes or blinks.

There's one peculiarity about the house that Peter's brain can't leave alone:

There's something very important about shoes.

Not to anyone else, it seems. Only to him.

Shoes are never to be worn in the house. Ever. Your shoes come off at the door and go immediately into whichever cubby they assigned you on the giant shoe-shelf by the front door. (It looks exactly the same as the shoe-shelves they always have in anime, which Peter appreciates in an inside-joke kind of way — which he doesn't understand until he realizes that he only thinks it's funny because he knows Wade would make the same connection and find a way to turn it into a joke, or a sprawling series of jokes.)

The shoe cubbies are labeled by name. Handwritten. First names only. Only ever first names with the Brotherhood. There are three guys named Matt, who only ever get called Matt, but their cubbies say "MATT", "MATTHEW", and "MATTY".

"MIKEY," says Peter's cubby.

In the rare moments when Peter has nothing else to do, he goes to the shoe-shelf and looks at it and learns people's names. No, not people's names. He learns the shoes' names.

If someone hands Peter an envelope or a sandwich and says "Take this to Chris," or flags him down and says "Trent has a phone call," or "Hugh wants to talk to Justin, could you go find him?" the first place Peter goes is the shoe-shelf. If the shoes are there, you know their owner is in the house. If the shoes are gone, so is he.

Some people, Peter learns this way, are almost never in the house. When they are, he watches where he's going more carefully.

Peter finds that he likes to know where people are, if not specifically then at least in general terms of here/not here. He starts keeping these tabs consciously. Even though he never says anything about it out loud, after a while people start coming to him first when they need to know whether so-and-so is around today. He always has an answer for them, and that answer is never wrong, and they smile their polite smiles at him.

He feels useful.

A couple weeks in, Peter finally admits to himself that he *likes* the rules. They may be strict, but they're rarely excessive, and for the most part their reasons are self-evident.

You turn the lights off when you're the last one from a room to conserve power. You wipe the bathroom sink so it's clean for the next guy. You don't wear shoes in the house because it keeps the floors cleaner and cuts down on noise (that many feet moving around on floors this old, it's bound to be noisy). Everyone wakes up and goes to bed at the same time so nobody disturbs anyone's sleep. Everyone eats the same food because it's easier for the kitchen rotation and less wasteful. Hugh's rule is that he writes the rules down so that no one has to worry about forgetting them.

There's a quaker-like simplicity to it all, a reassurance in the regulation.

All of these things slowly settle a knot that's been inside Peter for... hell, who knows, maybe his whole life. It satisfies a need he can't name.

It makes him less afraid.

A few rules aren't written down, but someone always makes them perfectly clear and in a calm voice. Like in the beginning, when Hugh asks if Peter has a phone, and then asks to have that phone.

"Why?" Peter asks. (He's still new, still learning, and "kinda special" as they like to call him when they think he can't hear, and so he's still allowed to ask *why*. But only once per topic. Whatever answer is given, that has to be answer enough. Often it is. But when it's not, it's *really* not.)

"It's a rule," Hugh says. "Personal phones are usually only ever a distraction." (Peter remembers them saying that about wearing hats in school, that they were a "distraction", and didn't understand the beef then, either.) "We're not gonna throw it away or anything. Everyone's phones stay in storage. If you ever really need it to make a call we can give it back to you for that, though there shouldn't really be any need. We have four different land lines."

Peter has just enough time to see the alerts for nineteen new texts and four missed calls before turning it off and handing it over. Hugh puts it in a ziploc, labels the bag with MIKEY written on a piece of masking tape, and Peter doesn't see that phone ever again.

(Very late that night he takes the battery out of the burner — doesn't know why he kept it, but he did — and all his Spidey things, puts them in a pillowcase he swiped from one of the empty rooms, and tapes the bundle up against the underside of his bunk. The crawlspace between mattress and floor is too narrow for most of these guys to fit into, so he thinks it'll be safe there. Safer than in his duffel anyway, which no longer seems like a place other people will keep their hands out of.)

Morning after, he goes up to Hugh while he's smoothing the day's rotation schedule onto the wall by the shoes.

"Where do you put the phones?" asks Peter.

"I already told you."

"You said 'storage'. That's more of a state of being than a location."

Hugh lowers his hands. There are faint grey ink-smudges on the edges of his palms. "Do you need to make a call?"

Might be nice to see who's been trying to call me. "Not as such," says Peter.

"Then why do you want to know?"

He pulls on his fingers and shrugs. "What if they get stolen? What if someone needs to make a call really fast but the phones are too far away? What if they're in someplace like the basement where it gets flooded and everyone's phones get wrecked?"

Hugh blinks, sighs through his nose, lets a relaxed smile slip across his face. "Mikey..." he says, squaring his shoulders. "You can trust us."

Where've I heard that one before. Peter tries to channel his revulsion into a facial expression that

he hopes indicates shyness, and smiles. “I know,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for it being so short, too. My brain being scattered means I’ve been chapter-hopping instead of plowing through chronologically. I’ve got a lot written for a bunch of future chapters. I wish I could tell you that this means updates will happen faster, but I try not to make promises that life won’t let me keep.

Also I’m glad that so many of you caught on that Deadpool was behind the \$200 and the paid rent, because that means I didn’t have to write those scenes out. :P Live feedback ftw.

Next chapter: Things to do in the belly of the whale.

Souljacker

Chapter Summary

In which Peter (being Peter) strives to be useful, everyone's ulterior motives get together and make little baby ulterior motives of their own, and the author doesn't know shit about plot.

Chapter warnings: Self-injury (brief, mildish), various forms of indoctrination/control/gaslighting, brief mentions of child abuse/abandonment, dissociation/depersonalization

Chapter Notes

1. Sorry for the wait. I have a pretty good list of excuses but nobody likes hearing those.
2. Holy bouncing crapballs when did we hit a thousand kudos? ...When did we leave the 1k mark in the freaking *dust*? I LOVE YOU ALL, YOU GIVE ME REASON TO LIVE and please do not feel any personal responsibility for my well-being because of this, I'm just saying, YOU'RE AWESOME is all I'm saying.
3. An extra thank-you shoutout to Ruthless and Stormy for idea-bouncing, point-making, and telling me some things Google could not; without your input, this chapter would've taken even longer and been even less convincing (if that's even possible). And although I am totally blaming you for derailing my original shitstain of a "plot" with (pfffft) *logic*, I feel like this'll turn out to be a stronger story because of it. So, sincerely, thank you for fucking up my shit.
4. And a thank-you shoutout to JoeyAndromeda for soothing the savage beast of insecurity at the last minute.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There are nine kids in the house. The youngest is eleven but most of them are in their mid-teens.

It takes a while for Peter to count them because they're usually carefully spread across the property. The other Brothers seem reluctant to let the boys interact with each other too much, or at least not without heavy, lingering adult supervision. The kind you can really *feel* breathing damp air down your neck.

But they are teenagers, after all, and thanks to smooth practice and a lot of *fuck you* determination, they often find time and ways to talk together freely. Peter is not exempt from this. They "bump into" him in the halls or garden, same way they do with each other, and then he's cornered.

As much as they work to include him in their misshapen social circle, they seem a little unsure how to act around him. They can tell he's the oldest of them (though, like everyone else here, they think

he's still young enough to be lumped into the same demographic), which Peter knows traditionally means he should be a sort of social linchpin or landmark for them, except... well, he's *him*.

So they tend to flock around him, out of that age-equals-leadership instinct, but then they mostly just talk to each other, and Peter mostly just listens. "Supervising," they joke at him. (They also use some slang that he's never heard before, and although he's used to feeling out of step, for the first time in his life he feels *old*.)

Peter mostly can't tell them apart without their shoes, but he learns their stories well enough, which come stuttering out of each boy in the form of sarcastic quips and self-deprecating jabs and the occasional who's-had-it-worst contest.

Of course Peter has more than enough material to participate in these contests, and he might even win — not that he can share any of the more brutal experiences he's accumulated so far, not with them. Not with both Spider-Man *and* Peter Parker being secret identities now.

Besides, he has no desire to one-up them. He has nothing to prove to them and nothing to gain by doing so, and there's probably some kind of psychological risk if he accidentally invalidates their feelings or something. They're not exactly as sheltered as the average Midtown High student was — they're all here for a reason.

Bad reasons, mostly. (Kicked out of the house, mostly.) Mouthed off to drunk dad; mom's new beau didn't want kids around; got caught having sex; got caught smoking weed; came out as gay; came out as trans; came out as gay. (Only one ran away, and the one with the red hair has always been really careful never to let slip anything personal.)

Most parents must really, really suck.

Peter starts to wonder, privately, if biologically reproducing somehow activates a latent "evil" gene. And then he wonders, even more privately, if maybe he didn't luck out being raised by May and Ben instead of his own parents. If maybe May and Ben were good to him by virtue of their never having produced biological offspring. If maybe Richard and Mary Parker would've turned out to be the kind of people who'd change the locks on him when they found out that he liked guys as much as girls, or that he was "special needs" (god, he hates that phrase), or that he liked sneaking out at night to stop crime with nothing between him and the sky but a unitard.

May and Ben would've still taken him in, he's pretty sure. Orphaned by death or orphaned by abandonment, it wouldn't have made a difference to them.

Peter never would've ended up cornered into a place like the Brotherhood, not like these kids felt cornered. Peter's wiry and flexible and good at finding another way out. (He really should've been bitten by a radioactive ferret instead.)

May — and — Ben — May — and — Ben, he thinks: an inner mantra to counteract the outer chanting, because while Peter Parker has been in many a tight spot, he has *never* been entirely without options or alternatives, he has *never* had to give himself fully over to a single resource for survival, and he has *never* been totally dependent on any one thing.

Even as a target for high-school bullying, Peter had places to hide, a friend or two to have his back, after-school labwork for AP bio to give him an excuse to stay in the building until Flash got bored waiting for him outside.

Even as a preadolescent orphan, Peter had back exits, wiggle room, contingencies (even if he wasn't old enough to understand them yet) — he had May and Ben.

There's always another resource, another exit strategy somewhere. There's always a May and Ben. Peter needs to remember that now more than ever.

His brain clamps down. He needs to *remember* that.

May and Ben. May and Ben. May and Ben. I wonder how Wade is doing does he miss me is he lonely should I be worrying about him May and Ben.

Most of these kids may be unfathomably more worldly and lived than Peter was at their age, but they're pretty clearly blind to whatever their personal May-and-Bens are. Peter wants to grab each kid and shake them and tell them to use their brains because if they think the Brotherhood is their only answer, then no, they *don't* have it all figured out, and it doesn't matter how much they've been through, because if they can't see their own May-and-Bens then clearly they *haven't* seen it all.

...Suddenly Peter understands why adults complain about teenagers. (Suddenly Peter understands that this new perspective means *he is an adult* now, for real this time. ...And so maybe it's time to stop yelling at people — at Avengers, at anyone — about how much of an adult he is, because that's basically what these *kids* are doing every second of every day, literally or metaphorically, while the *actual* adults are just off... adulting.)

The kids remind him to remind himself. He holds onto the idea of May and Ben like a talisman, like a stim toy, and with that firmly in hand he shifts his focus.

He'll be able to get out when he needs to get out. Have faith in that. But right now he needs to stay.

Right now he needs to pay attention.

Follow the money, says his brain. *Where there's smoke, there's fire*, says his brain. *That man behind the curtain*, says his brain. (Idioms are always the first or the last.)

He listens more closely. He studies more than just shoes. Hierarchy unwinds before him, but it's not a chain, it's a web. Because of course it is. Peter's somewhere near the bottom, as per usual, but that suits him just fine.

It works like this:

Hugh is in charge of the house, but he's not in charge of the Brotherhood.

Neither is Greg, or Drew, or Allen, or Robert, or anyone else who's explicitly in charge of anything around here.

Somebody's in charge of the Bootstrap Brotherhood as a whole. It's too well organized, too well established — too hierarchical and too *cherry-picked* to be the result of collective consensus and random luck. It's a very specific type of downtrodden white male who ends up here. Peter may have more than a few degrees of separation from, say, Joel, who failed two suicide attempts and once robbed a freaking *synagogue* after the state revoked his food stamps, but as “Mikey”, Peter falls pretty clearly into the “at-risk youth” category like the actual teenagers, and that makes them the same sociological ilk.

And that can't be an accident.

Also, someone is clearly funding the operation. Every day the chore rotation includes at least two teams to go out and gather funds, by washing cars, by selling flowers from the greenhouse, by selling whatever pastries Greg stayed up all night baking. Someone named Byron knows how to

fix bicycles and runs a mobile repair shop out of a panel van and that brings in a surprising amount of means.

Not nearly enough to feed this many people, or to keep the lights on. Peter's well acquainted with how much it costs to survive (much less this comfortably), and unless someone's fudging the numbers, then the Brothers' fundraising efforts are by every measure inadequate to the task of filling bellies. The garden is abundant and carefully planned (Anders is in charge of the garden), but it's supplementary at best.

So there must be someone involved with deep pockets, an inheritance or an investment portfolio or Powerball winnings. This person would have to be a member; outside donations are charity are handouts are everything that is evil about Society.

And if there's one person with money, and a bunch of people without, Mr. Moneybags will *always* find a way to be in charge, if he wasn't in charge from the start. The one with the resources will always entertain their own entitlement. Maybe not even consciously. That's just how people are.

...But rich people, Peter knows, don't end up here. They just *don't*. Everything about the Bootstrap Brotherhood is about getting back on your feet in a very particular way, and if you're rich, you're already standing strong — up on the damn roof, no less.

So then Peter thinks maybe there's a larger umbrella organization paying into the Brotherhood and the house, funneling the cash from some war chest built up by members in some other chapter who maybe pay their dues in a more traditional sense.

But that idea goes by the wayside fast. Peter knows (okay well, he *thinks* he knows) from eavesdropping that there's some kind of boss, but said boss never gets referred to by name, rank, or even ridiculous made-up title like Godfather or Kingpin or Grand Poobah. Sometimes there are references to "the management" but it's still unclear whether that's supposed to mean the mysterious-big-cheese-who-probably-exists or the collective group of men-who-are-in-charge-of-specific-things.

Still. You can't have a place like this run with such gloriously clockwork rhythm unless someone's winding the gears.

Probably.

The more the question weighs on him, the cagier Peter gets around the others. He doesn't trust himself to open his mouth without that question falling out of it. Questions in general — or at least, questions any more probing than "Do you know what we're having for dinner tonight?" or "Have you seen the trowel with the blue handle?" — are kind of frowned upon. *Politely* frowned upon, but the last thing Peter wants is extra attention. Spider-Man wears a mask for more reasons than to safeguard his identity.

So Peter doesn't ask the question that he's not supposed to ask.

Not out loud, anyway.

He keeps his mouth shut, dodges the eyes of others, and keeps his own eyes wide, wide open.

Drew, the blue button-down from the diner, is in the house sometimes. Only sometimes. His shoes are brown business-casual that are more scuff than leather. For whatever reason he reminds Peter of Harry, and not in a good way. Peter therefore classifies Drew as a cuckoo bird, because that's what Harry was. (Is. Whatever.) (Because of the way cuckoos trick other birds into raising the

cuckoos' young, which take over the nest and kill the host birds' actual young. Because cuckoos trick you into nurturing something harmful to you.)

Drew-the-cuckoo-bird is in charge of "construction", which means he's in charge of whatever goes on behind the door at the far end of the huge industrial kitchen. The door is metal, weighty, and ominously locked at pretty much all times. If Hugh hadn't pointed it out to him in passing during his orientation tour, Peter would've just assumed it was a cold-storage room.

The handwritten sign taped to the construction room door says BY ADMITTANCE ONLY. Drew has the only key. He doesn't go in very often, and always only at night or when most of the Brothers are out of the house on errands.

There are only two other people who ever go in there — and when they're not in there, they're out of the house. Peter doesn't even know their names, or their shoes.

He's not dumb enough to ask Drew (or anyone else) what "construction" even refers to.

Going by the layout of the floor above, the by-admittance-only construction room is unduly large. Every so often Peter slips out of his bunkbed in the middle of the night, sneaks down the stairs via ceiling (because the floors all creak), then drops softly down and puts his ear to the pileless carpet above the construction room. Sometimes he hears muffled voices (that's how he knows about the two others besides Drew), sometimes the clicky-clack of plastic and metal being manipulated, but usually nothing at all. Which leads him to wonder *where* the construction team even is, and what they're doing when they're not... uh, constructing.

When Peter's chore rotation gives him a valid excuse to be in the kitchen, he passes by the locked door almost every chance he gets, which isn't very often. It's way in the back past the potatoes and onions.

He sniffs the air around the frame, tests the lock, feels the handle for textures or residues, examines the floor for scuffs, spills, drag lines, anything.

Nothing. There might as well not be a door there at all.

Outside the house he circles around in the garden, looking for a window, a back entrance. Nothing.

He can't shake the suspicion that there's a second entrance to the construction room accessible from the basement, but he's never allowed in the basement, and the door to the basement is usually locked too. They only let people down there to clean up the flooding after a rain, and Peter is never among those people. He looks too scrawny to be useful for such manual labor. And anyway his theory about the secondary access via basement is only a theory.

Maybe the door wouldn't be so maddening if he weren't perfectly capable of just ripping through it with his bare hands. It occurs to Peter that he might be overemphasizing its importance in his own head, purely because it's forbidden.

But his relentless brain latches onto it, twists it around in maddening circles like a Rubik's cube. He hates Rubik's cubes. They're just brightly colored blocks of frustration.

He also hates that story about Adam and Eve and the fruit, and the cruel god in a snakeskin suit who likes to psychologically torture his creations. The one thing you want is the one thing you can never.

It occurs to Peter that maybe whatever goes on in the construction room is what's really funding the Brotherhood. And if that's the case then it must be something illicit, because why else would

Drew keep it so shady and hush-hush? Maybe they're building weapons to sell, or cooking meth.

...Maybe his brain's just trying to mash the two mysteries together for the sake of convenience. Occam's razor is great for philosophy and science but kind of falls apart when it comes to people and the things that people do.

One time, during his free hour, he's in the kitchen to get something from the snack cabinet, looking idly at the door and rehashing the same ideas as always, when the construction room door opens just a crack — and the lights inside it are already turned off so Peter can't catch even a glimpse inside — and Drew emerges from it.

Drew notices Peter's eyes on him and he freezes up tight for a split-second — and it's so brief that Peter wouldn't notice it if Spidey-sense didn't flash against his skull for just that split-second — then Drew smiles at Peter without showing any teeth. He closes the lock with an exaggerated click, wiggles the handle to make sure it stuck, and walks past Peter (far too close), still smiling at him with uncomfortable directness. Peter leans his ass against the edge of the counter and chews his Clif bar, allowing his face to remain blank and vacant.

As an afterthought, and in a numbingly childlike gesture, Peter waves hello to Drew.

Drew pauses by the flour bin and murmurs a quiet "Hm" to himself before leaving the kitchen, and as soon as he's gone Peter lets himself hyperventilate and rake both hands through his hair so roughly he yanks out more than a few strands.

Okay *that* was not *nothing*.

It is most assuredly *not* all in his head. His instincts made a good call.

In that moment, the construction room becomes much more important than the shoe-shelf.

Now he *has* to get in there. But quietly. Without blowing his cover. Because he has no idea what he'll find, and after he finds it he might need to keep being "Mikey" in order to deal with it. They have to *let* him in.

How the hell is Peter supposed to make that happen? Sometimes Spider-Man can talk down a scared junkie who's robbing a convenience store out of desperation, but that's only because the robber secretly *wants* to be talked down. Genuine persuasion isn't exactly Peter Parker's strong suit.

The temptation to break the door off its hinges only intensifies.

He dreams about it, about punching through the layers of reinforced metal like the Hulk and walking in to find a secret lab with human subjects, or a pit of agitated snakes and magic-charged fire, or the corpses of Bluebeard's past wives hanging on meathooks, or just a void that he falls into and into and into.

Most of the time.

When he doesn't have nightmares about the construction room, he has good dreams about Wade.

He's not sure which kind of dream hurts worse, because when you decide how you feel about a dream, you also have to factor in how you feel when you wake up from it. He doesn't like waking up to find himself on a squeaky bunk, alone in a room with three politely snoring strangers, remembering all at once why he's here and not with Wade.

Besides, he can calm himself enough to get back to sleep after a nightmare, but he can never get back to sleep after that.

Defense mechanisms can get unhealthy fast, but on the other hand, sometimes there's something you actually need some goddamn defense from. The mechanisms are a *survival* tool. People wouldn't develop them so quickly if they weren't helpful in a Darwinistic sense.

Peter's held this opinion for a long, long time.

Sometimes... sometimes, having trust issues can be exactly the thing you need to stay safe. In Peter's book — and it's a hardcover doorstopper of a book, with an extensive index and thousands of footnotes — anyone who *actively tries* to convince you of their trustworthiness is automatically flagged in red.

When someone does that, it indicates two things:

One, that they don't believe their behavior will be enough to earn your trust over time. Which means they know there's something wrong with their behavior.

And two, that they have a vested interest in gaining your trust, preferably in a hurry.

That vested interest is always selfish. It may not necessarily be to your detriment, sure, but you won't know until it's too late. What you do know is that your own needs are, in the other person's estimation, absolutely a secondary consideration (if considered at all).

So you have to look after your own needs yourself.

Sometimes secretly.

Peter feels a cold curl of nausea every time he smiles at one of the Brothers or tries to open his mouth to vocalize along with their stupid, unintelligible chants. It's astonishing that they don't see right through his forced, rigid expressions. His own face feels like plastic to him, or half-cured wax.

He stims freely to try and offgas the stress of maintaining the act, fidgeting or rocking or chewing on his shirt. Sometimes that seems to make them queasy. Other times it makes them smile at him with pity or polite indulgence, and that makes *him* queasy. (Which makes him stim harder. Which makes them smile wider...)

One evening Peter's on kitchen rotation and swaying mechanically while he cuts chicken. Drew — who takes chore rotations like everyone else, but only four days a week — is propped on a stool across the way, and peeling potatoes, and staring at Peter's movements with predatory intensity. Peter is wearing borrowed sunglasses because dinner tonight involves onions and Peter's eyes hate onions even when he's not the one chopping them, and the sunglasses are mirrored, so Drew can't tell that Peter is looking right back at him.

Peter pauses, itches his jaw with the back of a wrist, and even though he doesn't feel like flapping, he flaps a few times before picking the knife back up, still swaying, and still pretending not to look at Drew.

Drew's eyebrows do a "gotcha" thing when Peter flaps.

And Drew's presence traces sickeningly along the perimeter of Spidey-sense in the very specific

way that means a bad guy has spotted a weakness, real or imagined, that they mean to exploit. It's not a bad tingle, but it's not a good one, either. It's the *you are a very strong deer but that mountain lion is looking at you* tingle.

Which, pause: Stimming is neither an exploitable weakness or a sign thereof. So, what exactly does Drew think he's...

This is when it finally hits Peter that the Brothers *can't* see through his act and *can't* see his discomfort, because they can't make heads or tails of his body language. They don't speak Spider-Man. To them, he looks random and helpless.

To *Drew*, he looks random and helpless.

Implications fall into place. Peter pulls a stretchy tendon out of the chicken meat. Something inside of him finally... *finally* settles.

His brain stops compulsively twisting the Rubik's cube, and starts prying it apart brick by brick. Breaking it down into components.

Peter understands components.

Long before anyone in his life figured out he was spectrum, Aunt May would try to quiet Peter's hands and forestall any and all fidgeting unless it was with Legos. Until that one time when Peter and his fidgeting fixed the VCR remote that had been stumping the grownups for months. After that, Uncle Ben would shrug and say something like, "If the boy wants to use his hands, let him use 'em for something helpful. The air conditioner's acting up again — c'mon, Peter, let's see what we can do with it, I'll show you how to adjust the..."

Something in the house was always "acting up". Uncle Ben knew a little bit about how everything worked, and was nothing but encouraging when Peter dug his hands in to see how much further he could take it.

This is how Peter became the poor man's Bob Vila before his balls dropped. It might also be why his fine motor skills are off the charts, and maybe why he can stare into the guts of a machine he's never seen before and be treated to a swirling network of exploded-view diagrams in his head (more vivid and flexible by far than Tony's cool floaty 3D imaging system). He can see the cause-effect of most of the components even if he doesn't know what the components are called.

One time he looked at a car engine and could pretty much tell what everything in it was for, even though he's still not 100% on which pedal is the gas and which is the brake.

One time Tony showed him the inside of a recently replaced arc reactor and *it made sense*. (Tony thought Spider-Man's awe was due purely to the "oo shiny" factor. And, okay sure, that was part of it, but Peter didn't have the vocabulary to express how mind-blowing it was that if you were extra delicate about how you connected *the thingy* then you could get *this* to do *that* instead of doing *the other thing* and how this was *a completely new paradigm*. So instead he just squealed and flapped until his fingers went numb, then bounced around the ceiling of Tony's lab making the loudest bird calls he could think of while Tony laughed in that "look how excited this cute puppy is" kind of way.

Maybe he and Tony could've become actual friends that day, if one of them could've overcome the communication barrier. If Peter could've made Tony understand that *Peter* understood, that they were on closer levels than either of them realized.)

It's not perfect, though. Peter's not so good at understanding bombs, grenades, or anything with a cause-effect that leads inexorably toward self-destruction. He can *see* the internal processes, sure, but they don't make *sense* because things are supposed to be designed to *work*, not do the opposite. The existential confusion muddies up his mental diagrams until he's basically just an illiterate kid poking a landmine with a stick.

Because the Parker Luck has to find its insidious way into everything good.

Uncle Ben wanted him to go into engineering. Maybe Peter should've listened. Maybe he should've used his one-and-only shot at higher education, not to try and compensate for his weaknesses so he could indulge his interests and maybe be less afraid all the time, but to build up his strengths so he could make himself *useful*.

"You should do what you love," said Aunt May, and he listened.

"You should play to your strengths," said Uncle Ben, and maybe it's time to listen now.

Time to draw some attention. Peter gives himself one more night of being a low-key nobody in the Brotherhood, to shore himself up.

Then he begins slowly.

Peter starts twirling his fork at dinner. Playing the spoons with increasing intricacy and speed until people get annoyed and ask him to stop. Tying unnecessarily fancy knots in the curtain cords. Sculpting ornate things out of his mashed potatoes. Fixing every leak in every sink. Adjusting the water flow in all the toilets in the house until they only clog once a week instead of near-daily. Altering the air-valve thingies on the huge commercial clothes dryers in the laundry room so things get dry twenty minutes faster without using any extra electricity. Secretly breaking some component of the fridge so he can repair it later in front of a witness.

He's good at working in 3D. He's good with his hands. He's good with intricate tech. (Hell, he built his webshooters, didn't he? Too bad he can't show them off now; it'd really help speed things up.)

He grins and flaps and hops up and down after allowing someone to "catch" him at these little handyman tasks.

Look at me, I'm random and helpless.

I'm also *useful*.

Greg-who's-in-charge-of-the-kitchen notices first, and possessively claims "Mikey" as full-time kitchen assistant. Lay on a little spider-reflex and Peter can dice vegetables or debone a fish with as much flair as the most showboating sushi chef in the world. He still roams the house in search of opportunities to demonstrate his skills, but less often.

Greg's alright. A little bit crusty, not as carefully polite as the others, and he's the only one so far who's told Peter that he thinks he's lying about his age (though he thinks Peter is *younger* than 19, not older, and although Peter's a little miffed about that, it does help his look-at-me-I'm-Bambi cover act). But Greg's instructions are always absolutely crystal, and he teases Peter so lightly that Peter doesn't even question whether it's meant to be affectionate.

Peter's glad that Greg noticed first.

When you're working in the kitchen, you have to wear shoes, but not your own. You have to wear

the black Crocs. There's an array of them in the tower of milk crates by the entryway, small sizes at the bottom and big ones at the top. They belong to no one in particular. They make walking on tile feel like walking across a memory foam mattress and they have become one of Peter's favorite things in the world, even though they squeak on the floor.

Being the designated kitchen aide has two main effects on Peter's daily routine with the Brotherhood:

First, it takes him off of the normal chore rotation. He still has different things to do each day, but he doesn't have to check the big chore-rotation masterpost that Hugh tapes up near the shoes every morning. He just always reports to the kitchen, which begins to sound and smell familiar, and Greg tells him what he'll be doing today. It's one less thing to think about, one less pound of weight on his back.

Second, it keeps him within spitting distance of the construction room.

Peter keeps a subtle eye on the locked door. It never slips completely out of his awareness.

Whenever Drew comes through the kitchen to get to the construction room, he keeps a subtle eye on Peter. Not so subtle that Peter doesn't notice. He's on the lookout for it, after all.

Soon Drew's attention stops pinging Spidey-sense.

Word's spread now that "the weird kid" — god, he's never going to escape that title, is he? — is some kind of universal repairman. (Peter has to physically bite on his tongue to stop from declaring himself the Truest Repairman and challenging people to compete in the Sun Chamber. He's not really sure why fate has set him up to be both Abed *and* Troy.)

(*No*, thinks some part of his brain. *You're just good with your hands. You know who your Troy really is.*)

(*Shut up*, he thinks back, listlessly, knowing even as he does so that tonight's dreams will not feature the construction room, which leaves only one alternative. Which means waking up will suck extra hard and he won't be able to get back to sleep afterward and tomorrow is going to be exhausting.)

Peter's crouching next to a toolbox and tracking down the cause of the dishwasher's recent drop in efficacy — something messing with the water pressure, he guesses, probably just a hose somewhere needs unclogging or something boring like that — when he hears Drew and Greg talking on the other side of the kitchen. He pretends to be looking through the toolbox for a smaller wrench so he can sneak a glance in their direction. They're standing too close together and their voices are lowered, so Peter knows he's not supposed to be able to hear them.

Yeah, well, he's not supposed to stick to walls, either.

He scoots a little deeper into the hidden corner behind the dishwasher and stops fixing, starts fidgeting, so he can focus on listening.

"I'm not gonna say it again," says Greg.

"Look, the kid has magic hands or something," says Drew. "Plenty of guys here know how to restart the stove when the pilot light goes out and anyone with opposable thumbs can chop celery."

"Someone here is eatin' Alpo tonight."

“That’s not — that’s not what I meant, and you know it. Come on, Greg. I’m only saying the skill sets *you* need are a lot easier to find. Construction’s been underserved for *months* and ever since Bill—“

“Does construction *need* months to produce?”

“—and protection’s dissolving in a vacuum. Along comes this kid and he’s like seven solutions on one silver platter. Keeping him on kitchen staff is holding *all* of us back.”

“I don’t think I like what you’re implyin’ here.”

“Stop looking for animosity where there isn’t any. We’re all on the same side, Greg.”

“He’s just a kid and you wanna reassign him to protection. That ain’t *right*.”

“The whole *point* is that he’d be more valuable *in* the construction room. He’s not going to go marching off with—“

“It’s not *safe*.”

“Oh, but being surrounded by edged weaponry, lit stoves, and grumpy ex-cons carries zero risk?”

“...Stove only burns you if you touch it,” says Greg.

“And construction is only dangerous if you mess up,” says Drew. “Which I don’t think he will. I can teach him. I think he’ll pick it up fast. Very fast.”

Greg is quiet a while, and Peter remembers, belatedly, to jiggle the dishwasher components around so it sounds like he’s working and not eavesdropping.

“No,” says Greg. “I like him.”

“It’s not like I’d need him every night of the week,” says Drew. “He’s young, he’s enthusiastic, he has energy. He could do split duty.”

“If you really think that kid would be able to thrive, much less give back, on split duty, you clearly haven’t been paying enough attention.”

“You keep calling him a kid,” Drew says.

Huh?

“Huh?” says Greg.

“He’s not a minor,” says Drew.

“Not so sure about that,” mutters Greg.

“He looks young and acts younger but he’s *not* a minor,” Drew insists.

“What, did you card him before you introduced yourself?”

“Haven’t you seen him with the *actual* minors? He has no idea what to do with them.”

“Like he’s so suave with the rest of us,” says Greg.

Hey! Peter thinks.

“Look, I’m trying to meet you halfway here,” says Drew.

Greg snorts. “How do you figure that?”

“I’m doing you the courtesy of a direct conversation instead of going over your head and talking to the management.”

Peter drops the wrench and it clatters under the dishwasher and out of reach. He mutters a soft “crud” and starts fumbling for it distractedly while his brain fumbles over Drew’s words.

Okay, so “management” is the big boss, not these guys. Which means there *is* a big boss. His instinct was right about that, too. Okay. Okay, good to know, filing that one away for later consideration.

“Have you tried talking to *him*?” Greg asks, voice even lower than before. “He might have an opinion, y’know.”

“He wants to be useful,” says Drew. “That’s his opinion. He’d be the *most* useful with us. The Brotherhood benefits from that too. You need to stop thinking of yourself.”

“I’m not the one who’s—“

“Greg, look me in the eye and tell me he doesn’t remind you of your kid.”

There’s a protracted silence.

“He’s kitchen,” Greg says at last.

“No, he’s Brotherhood,” says Drew.

The silence lingers longer this time and that probably means they’re exchanging facial expressions. The tip of Peter’s middle finger brushes against the wrench and sticks to it; he drags it out with a hollow scrape that sounds louder than it should in such a big kitchen.

A throat clears. Footsteps leave. Containers of flour and shortening get pulled from cabinets, plonked on the steel countertop, their lids peeled open and flung aside with unusual carelessness. Greg mumbles grouchy nonsense to himself.

Peter finds the clogged water valve and clears it out swiftly. Triple-checks the flow. Wishes his thoughts were that easy to unclog.

Peter listens very, very carefully during the dinner-chanting that night. He’s never tried too hard before, gave up almost as soon as he realized it’d be a struggle.

Not this time, no. He listens hard. Squeezes his eyes shut and grinds his knuckles against the sharp bit of metal under the edge of the table, and centers all his errant awareness on that little spark of self-inflicted pain so that the rest of him — the overworked-and-underpaid part of him that translates the world into actual meaning — can *listen*.

Stress sucks down on his cognitive load capacity, and it jacks up his sensory issues, but — it jacks up his senses.

Superheroing 101: Any advantage at your disposal is only as advantageous as you can *make* it. (See also: hacking your weaknesses so they become strengths.)

Allen is giving the pre-chant pep talk tonight. Peter feels the sharp metal of the table bite through

his skin, feels the cool slide of blood between the crooks of his fingers, and uses that to drown out the endless minute shifting and squirming and muttering and clanking sliding tapping sniffing clinking coughing of the Brothers seated all around the room.

What's left is Allen-saying-words, and Peter zeroes in on that with focus so sharp and concentrated it makes his back sweat.

"Repeat the word until the word loses meaning," says Allen. "Burnout is the greatest psychological gift mankind has evolved. Its cousin is shock, the neurological balm to ease the strain of death. Burnout is the balm to ease the strain of life. You who have burned out have received the greatest gift your DNA has to offer. Consider the driving force of your burnout. It's still there, still present in your mind. Your burnout only disguises it, shields you from it, but can't destroy it or expunge it from your life. Meditate on that which still plagues you. Repeat the word until the word loses meaning. With that meaning lost, you will be free to build up your own meaning to fill the void, to fill your life, to never know hunger again and die with satisfaction. But to gain, you must first lose. To lose, you must first glut yourself. You must eat the fruit until you become sick with it, and lose all taste for it forever. Meditate upon your own regret until it has no more meaning, and stripped of meaning it will be stripped of its power over you. This is the way to freedom. It is an unkind process. Your Brothers are here for you. No man is alone here. Speak the name of your fear. Speak the name of your regret. Speak the name until its power over you has died, and when you die you will do so as the most powerful influence over your own life."

Only the slightest of pauses, then, before the arrhythmic chant starts up.

Peter strains to hone in on one voice at a time and it's like trying to follow the sounds of a single violin when the full orchestra is tuning up.

His ears are strong. He needs to have faith in his own ears. He breathes in through his nose and holds that breath there. Holds it. Holds it right there.

Each man uses a different word. No wonder he couldn't make them out before. But each man repeats his pet word over and over, giving Peter plenty of chances to sort out the syllables each voice carries.

Regret seems to be the most popular choice by far, followed by *Fear*.

Greed. Dependence. Addiction. What sounds suspiciously like *Perversion*.

Peter's damn good at picking up on patterns. And, his track record with individual people notwithstanding, he's not too shabby when it comes to broader sociological concepts and constructs, either.

Guilt, Peter thinks, but doesn't say.

Exhausted, he lets the fragile threads of language ravel back into the tangle of human sound and become lost in the knotwork. He's heard all he needs to hear for now. He also stops pressing his knuckles into the metal. There's only another minute or so of this before they eat, and his healing needs a chance to scab this over before he uses his bleeding hand to pick up a fork. A minute or so is all it takes these days. His healing hasn't been this good since before he moved out of Aunt May's.

The sad murmurs around him start to die down.

Distrust, he thinks, but doesn't say.

His prediction about which dream he'll have that night turns out to be frustratingly accurate. He wakes up from it around one in the morning, first disoriented and then disappointed. And yes, he is extremely tired the next day.

At least one thing in his life seems to be moving in the direction he wants, though.

Peter is washing the dishes that don't go in the dishwasher and, for once in his life, is not thinking about Drew's locked workroom. Instead he's thinking about Clint Barton, of all people.

Specifically, he's inwardly stimming on one of the last things he heard Clint say out loud. *So? He doesn't answer to us.*

There... aren't many people who take Peter's personal agency as an obvious given. The pigeon (*pigeonhawk? ha!*) is good people, Peter thinks. Not as studiously patient as Bruce — but then, who is? besides maybe the Dalai Lama — and not as empathetic as Sam, but for whatever reason, Clint comes closer to *getting it* than any of the others do.

(Peter knows the pigeon and the seagull have some kind of almost-friendship. Wonders if this — being the kind of people who *get it* — is part of their common ground.)

Clint might be some good company to have here. Clint's pretty scruffy and disillusioned and would have no trouble getting in the door and blending right in, even without his spy training.

Not that Peter needs *backup*, per se. But... just... things are getting wobbly. Getting weird(er). Spider-Man is starting to feel like a recurring dream that he no longer has. The clocks in the house tick, and tick, and tick.

(The next time he re-reads *Dune* he will no longer have to imagine the madness the other characters feel when they listen to Fenring speak.)

So yes, Peter doesn't require backup so much as he wishes for an anchor. There's nothing to hold onto here but the rhythm of the rules, and the gentle manners of the Brothers. Having some field support might be worth the blow to Peter's pride.

It might even be worth letting a second Avenger in on Spider-Man's secret identity.

Peter wonders if the battery in the burner phone needs charging, and tries to sift through phone numbers in his memory as he scrubs burned cheese off one of the big pots with a wad of steel wool.

“...rth to Mikey.”

Peter looks up.

“Welcome back,” says Greg.

“I don't think there's anything wrong with spacing out when you're washing dishes,” Peter says. “It's not like there's a hot stove, and none of these will break if I drop them.”

“Wasn't criticizing,” says Greg. “Don't be so defensive, kid, you know I'm always on your side.”

...*Really*. Peter tries to hold onto the sarcasm, tries to keep it up like a shield, but can feel himself softening to the genuine (if displaced) kindness in Greg's words anyway.

“You been doing that a lot,” Greg says. “Spacing out. Everything cool?”

Of course not. Peter only shrugs, because that was how he responded to direct questions when he was an actual teenager.

Greg raises his chin and gives Peter that unrelenting *well? I’m waiting* look.

“I’ve just been... I dunno, kind of bored?” Peter says.

“Thought you liked things quiet.”

“I do, but I’m kind of smart. Washing dishes doesn’t really do much to occupy my brain.”

“...Oh.”

“I like it in the kitchen,” Peter rushes to say. “I like hanging out with you. You’re cool. I just. You know.” He goes back to scrubbing.

“Could be doin’ more,” Greg says, after a while. His voice is different.

Peter shrugs again.

“Yeah, I guess I kinda knew that,” says Greg. “Not the only one either. We got yer back here, kid.”

Then there’s an arm settling platonically around Peter’s shoulders and it’s sweaty and heavy and *crushing him crawling through the spaces between his skin cells wh*

at what WHAT no fuck no NO OW Peter lunges away and swings the big pot and it thuds against Greg’s shoulder and hits the tiles with a catastrophic noise and water is *everywhere* and the only reason Peter doesn’t end up on the ceiling is because Greg’s “*Sorry I’m sorry!*” is so sharp it startles Peter to stillness.

He’s not sure how much time passes before Greg slowly bends to pick the pot off the floor and, Crocs squelching in the puddled dishwater, says, “Sorry. Take a break, okay? Take an hour. Two hours. I can finish up here. Not much for you to do anyway until it’s time to start dinner, so, yeah. Go. It’s okay.”

“Sorry,” says Peter.

“No, I feel like I had an idea somethin’ like that would happen. My bad, okay. Go have some free time, Mikey. Do whatever you need to do.”

Peter uses some of the time to take a shower, because the phantom hug makes his skin creep, the same way you feel crawled-on all day long after finding a tick on you.

Also because a two-hour break is not the same as permission to leave the house, and the shower is the only place you can actually be alone here, even if the eyelike knots in the wood-panel ceiling make him feel watched.

He never showers in the afternoon and it feels wrong. The water slides down his body the wrong way, and the cheap bar soap they all use doesn’t feel like it’s rinsing fully off, and the smell of it reminds him of a laundromat which makes him feel like a wrung-out shirt that got stretched to ruin because one of the sleeves got caught in the washer door.

Peter’s pretty sure he’s never exited a shower feeling *less* clean before.

Greg's an alright guy. He didn't mean anything and Peter knows that, but that's all the worse. It's just like with Tony, or Pepper, or Bruce, or Gwen, or Aunt May, or...

"I know you don't mean to hurt me," he whispers to the floor-tiles as he towels himself off, "but you *are* hurting me. And I don't mean to hurt you, but I have to do something to protect myself. I'm not mad at you, but I am scared of you. And unless you figure out how to stop hurting me, I'm going to have to keep on being scared of you, and that'll hurt *both* of us. You're the only one who can make this stop hurting us." He pushes the towel into the laundry chute and watches it slide over the edge and away. "Please."

He puts his dirty clothes back on and realizes he isn't sure who he's pretending to talk to.

Everyone, maybe.

No, not everyone. Nothing so crass and impersonal as "everyone".

Affection is usually a reluctant activity, and empathy is most often a confused one. Peter's not a hesitant person by nature, not really. Just... some lessons get forced into you with a pile-driver and then your skin heals over them and you can't cut them out without bleeding to death.

The way that most people show affection feels brutal. And when Peter shows affection, they rarely even recognize it for what it is.

Unless they learn to speak Spider-Man. Which is even less likely than them learning ASL. *Forget about* anyone understanding *both*.

...Well, okay, except for that damn seagull he keeps dreaming about and losing sleep over.

"Much good may that do me," Peter whispers, as a reminder to himself, but his heart's not in it.

Greg tells Peter he's got an out-of-the-house chore today. It's pretty obvious that Greg's trying to give him some of that intellectual stimulation and challenge without relinquishing Peter to construction duty, which is both touching and irritating (on top of working against Peter's plans, even if it is a step in the right direction), but. It's a sunny day, too warm for early November and Peter is glad for the excuse to get some air and some exercise.

Until the next second, when Greg tells him that his destination is the grocery store.

"I'm — I'm, uh, not sure that I..."

"Don't get yer panties in a twist, kid," says Greg. "You're not goin' alone. Take Clive and Ted with you. Make 'em do the heavy lifting, make 'em do the talking if you gotta, just don't let 'em sneak things into the cart that aren't on the list. I swear you're the only guy here who really knows how to take instruction. Remember, you're in charge. You can delegate. And don't lose the money." He hands Peter an envelope. The Brotherhood deals in cash.

The Costco's pleasantly deserted. Lack of shoppers doesn't help too much with the pop music piping in over the speakers or the fluorescent-light migraine or the clinging, cavelike, almost *existential* chill that's characteristic of all warehouse stores... but beggars, choosers, count your blessings, etc. Peter sends Clive off for the flour and rice, Ted for the peppers and cabbages, and as he makes his way to the bulk spices he pauses, looks over his shoulders one at a time. He's out of the house, and out of sight, and now's his chance he could just—

Wait, what's he talking about? He doesn't need to escape. He isn't with the Brotherhood involuntarily. Leaving would be as easy as walking out the door; he's pretty sure the only move anyone would make to stop him would be to try and talk him out of it.

The flight impulse remains, though, powerful and confused.

He can't leave. He's on a mission.

He doesn't need to leave. He's got things under control.

His instincts have been good about this so far. He was due for a dud. He tells himself this, but his pulse still bounces along inside his skin, spurring him.

Peter lowers his gaze to the list in his hand, and very deliberately reaches for a canister of dried oregano, and very deliberately places it in the cart.

He resolves to text Clint tonight. He's still not sure on the correct number exactly but he can keep firing off messages into the dark until he sinks the battleship. (Last-ditch scenario: ask Tony for Clint's number, because Tony's number is the only one, besides Aunt May's and MJ's and Gwen's, that Peter can always remember.) (Harry's number never made the learned-by-heart list because it always changed too frequently. That should've been a warning sign, really.)

His eyes scan across the labels for rosemary, and something cold rocks down into the pit of him.

He looks up at the person who's just rounded the corner and is now standing, staring, handle of their cart slipping from a suddenly slack grip (cart squeaking forward a few more inches on its own before stopping).

Peter blinks.

The other person blinks back. Slowly. Owlishly.

"...Bruce?" says Peter.

"Oh my god," says Bruce, and starts forward in that I'm-going-to-hug-you way, but stops himself at the last second. He puts a hand on the edge of the shelf in some kind of grounding gesture.

"You're alive," says Bruce.

"Well... yeah," says Peter. "Of course I am," he adds, because why would that even be a—

"Where've you been?" Bruce says, voice too loud. He flinches, glances around, then looks at his soft-soled sneakers (the same kind that old men wear) and does a few seconds of breathing exercises. "Are you okay?" he says, much more carefully, and buried in that even-softer-than-usual tone Peter can still hear an edge.

Peter panics, and tries to think not-green thoughts.

...Peter tries to think *thoughts*. "Um," he says.

Ted rounds the corner with three bags of bell peppers in each hand. He pauses, glances between Peter and Bruce, then arranges the produce in Peter's cart, propping the bags up against the side so they stand kind of upright. Ted smiles very directly and very politely at Bruce. "Hello," says Ted.

"...Hi," says Bruce, not smiling.

"Old friend of yours, Mikey?"

“‘Mikey’?” says Bruce.

“Um,” says Peter.

Ted and Bruce exchange some kind of cowboy high-noon staredown, Ted smiling his way through it, Bruce breathing steadily. *Draw*, thinks Peter.

Spidey-sense crawls up his back but fizzles out when it reaches his skull, like a dud firework.

“I’m sorry,” says Ted, “but we’re on a tight schedule, and the others need us to finish up here and get back.”

“Others? Back?”

“If you’d like to come down and check it out...” And Ted is passing Bruce a pamphlet from his back pocket before Peter can register the rest of the sentence, much less stop any of this from happening.

Bruce gives the pamphlet in his hand a thousand-yard stare.

It looks like a copy of the same one that Drew first gave to Peter — badly wrinkled in the middle from Ted’s pocket — and Peter clenches his toes inside of his shoes, hoping very hard that Bruce will notice the same thing that Peter did. Because now’s not exactly the time or place to explain what—

“Mikey,” says Ted. “Would you come help me with this, please?”

Peter glances down at the shopping list in his hand, because he’s supposed to be getting spices right now, and Ted’s supposed to get the cabbages on his own, and Bruce is staring at Peter with his head bent a little bit forward like he’s dying to ask a question, and the pamphlet is in Bruce’s hand, and Bruce’s cart is nudged up against the shelf on the other side of the aisle and will be in people’s way if anyone tries to come through, and the music on the speakers overhead changes to a different song and—

Ted’s hand comes to rest on the leading edge of Peter’s shopping cart and tugs it away. Peter’s got a grip on the handle, so he follows the moving cart, allows himself to be led away like a horse.

He looks over his shoulder at Bruce, and, once he’s sure he has Bruce’s eye, nods meaningfully at the pamphlet.

A faint brush of green rolls across Bruce’s neck and chin before vanishing, replaced by a reddish color and an expression that’s (maybe) about to become tears.

They reach the end of the aisle and turn the corner.

Peter floats along behind the cart like a balloon tied to a child’s wrist. Weightless, empty, no will. He holds onto the shopping list, shows it to Ted whenever Ted gestures to it. He holds onto the envelope, lays it next to the register when he finds himself in front of the register.

At some point they leave the cart behind, and Peter can feel the wind curling around his neck, and distantly he understands that they are no longer in the store, but he still just bobs along. A lazy, mindless balloon in the lazy sunlight. The air feels pretty good.

At some point, he’s back in the kitchen. Ted is talking to Greg and they both keep looking at him, and Peter shrinks down into his shoulders and wishes they’d just leave him alone.

Dinner comes and goes. He hears the chanting as a protracted echo, two or three hours later.

He wonders about the human brain's mysterious method of carbon-dating memories.

He has the flavor of toothpaste in his mouth and is floating down onto his bunk when he hears himself say, very belatedly, "Hey, if you see Clint..."

"Who's Clint?" asks Dan, from the top bunk.

Peter blinks and puts both his hands on the blanket. The fabric is rough and it doesn't feel good, but his fingers cherish it. "No one," says Peter. "Never mind."

His thoughts supply a memory-image of a faded tattoo, a naval anchor. (A secondary image, of Popeye the Sailor, overlays the first, because his brain's a smartass like that.)

Also a phrase: *A day late, a dollar short*. The phrase echoes for a while. It's got a good rhythm. It's bouncy, for something so bleak.

He lowers himself to the pillow (which always has other people's scents on it because laundry rotation throws all the bedding in together and then hands it back out at random) and silently chases around the day-late-dollar-short echo, and tries to remember what he was thinking about just a moment ago.

He gives up on that and instead tries to remember where his feet are.

Eventually, finally, the balloon has deflated, the echo has worn itself out, the room has that just-past-midnight feel to it, and Peter remembers that he's Peter.

With a snap he realizes that he's been feeling normal for like an hour and a half; he just didn't notice it until right now.

Peter's lying on his side facing the wall, a spring in the mattress burrowing into his hip because no matter how he arranges himself on this bed there's *always* a spring burrowing into some part of his body. He folds an elbow under his head and lightly rubs the fingertips of his other hand along the clammy wood wall. One of the wood panels has one of those knots that looks too much like an eye, and it's inches from his face, and it makes him uncomfortable unless he keeps brushing it with his fingers to reassure his lizard-brain over and over that it's not a real eye, no one is looking at him.

His memory keeps drawing him back to Bruce's eye, to Bruce looking at him. Peter presses the heels of his hands against his eyelids until bright colors swim, but even through that, all he's seeing is Bruce. The fear. The Hulk. The *heartbreak*. Writ so large on his big easygoing Bananer-face that it might as well have been spelled out with black Sharpie.

Spelled out in all caps, just like everything else around here.

Bruce doesn't deserve to feel that way. Bruce has never done wrong by him. Not really. The worst Bruce is guilty of is thinking Spider-Man needed more protection than he really did.

Not like *Drew*.

Peter shudders, involuntarily. Then shudders again, on purpose this time. The bed squeaks under him. He keeps shaking himself like that, kicks the mattress, tries to shudder the revulsion right out of him. Tries to shake it off ("Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play," sings Wade's voice in his head — and of all the things Peter's been trying lately to calm himself down, that one

unintended micro-thought *does* actually make him feel a little better).

“Settle down, Mikey,” murmurs a thick voice from the top bunk.

“Sorry, Dan.” He stops shuddering.

(Wade can make him feel better even when they’re nowhere near each other’s lives anymore.)

(*Imagine how much better it could feel if they were—*)

He cannot afford to be thinking about Wade right now. Things just got a lot more complicated today and it’s worrisome how much of this depends on poor Bruce and dumb chance.

Peter hopes to god (or whoever) that Bruce takes a good hard look at the pamphlet. Or gives it to Clint, because Clint doesn’t overlook visual details — or, well, okay, Clint’s a dumbass most of the time, but when he knows something’s up, you can’t put anything past him.

...Just as long as, once the Avengers do figure it out, they *actually* figure it out — all the way — and don’t stop with the assumption that Spidey’s gotten sucked in by accident.

...Just as long as, once the Avengers do figure it out, they hang back and let Spider-Man handle this, and don’t come charging in with their repulsors and their SMASH. God knows they get carried away when something pushes their weird *Protect Spidey!* button, and most of the Brothers aren’t bad guys. They don’t need superhero battles, they need social workers and maybe therapists — and anyway Peter’s the only superhero who knows whose shoes are whose. Also, Peter doesn’t know exactly what (or who?) Drew and Greg meant by “protection” and he’d rather not find out by going up against it (or them).

...Just as long as, once the Avengers do figure it out, Clint doesn’t tell Wade about it.

Because regardless of what Wade wanted from Peter, the protectiveness he showed in the meantime was real. (And as terrifying in retrospect as it was comforting at the time.) Peter doesn’t want to so much as entertain the thought of what might happen if Wade decided that the Brothers have been coercing Peter somehow. The kids would be safe, but other than them...?

Wade deliberately drew weapons against *Captain America* for him.

That is *not* fucking around. Even if Wade *didn’t* idolize Steve enough to have the shield symbol all over his underwear, that is not a thing anyone does lightly.

It’s not a thing you can *witness* lightly, either. Especially if you’re the reason for it.

Peter flattens his palm over the eye-knot in the wall, and presses his other hand to his face. Christ, why does he have trust issues. Why does he have such an issue *regulating* trust. Secrets are easy to regulate, because you decide what to tell, and to whom, based on circumstances. You don’t have to guess; you can logic it out like a sudoku puzzle.

But trust as an emotional thing? People are either in or they’re out. They’re Aunt May or they’re Drew. And that’s not right, Peter knows — he’s not stupid, he *knows* better than to treat it as a black-and-white issue because people are complicated, because sometimes you need to team up with a villain to fight a common enemy and it works out, because sometimes a person you love does something bad to you...

But the part of him that knows things and the part of him that feels things, they don’t get along so well.

The thing that makes it easy to keep a critical eye on the Brothers despite how restful it would be to just fall, eyes closed, into everything they're trying to offer, including the weird redemption philosophy. The thing that drove him panicking from Wade's bed in the middle of the night despite maybe...

Peter dreams about riding a motorcycle that drives along his weblines high above Manhattan rather than on the street, and when he stops at a red light, a seagull lands on the handlebars and starts preening Peter's hair.

He doesn't sleep long, and he wakes up in the middle of the night and in the middle of a thought.

That thought is *I need to talk to Wade*.

Peter flattens his palm over the eye-knot in the wall panel, and presses his other hand to his face. This is ridiculous. Regardless of what Wade's expectations were, everything from Peter's end was real and unvarnished and leaning in the same direction and *Yes I just admitted that to myself*.

Even if they can't get back to where they were, can't be friends again, Peter can at least make an effort to clear the air. To make sure Wade knows why Peter suddenly ditched him at some ungodly hour. That it was Peter's complete inability to regulate trust and to reconcile a Bad intention with a Good person much more than it was anything Wade did or didn't actually do, and...

Crap.

"Well," he whispers into his palm. "That was a mistake."

And now he *really* needs to talk to Wade. Because Wade deserves to *know*. Peter hates it when he doesn't know things like this and he can't leave Wade not-knowing. It isn't fair, it isn't right.

Wade deserves to know. In exchange for the face-off with Cap if nothing else. And Peter deserves to say it.

After. They'll talk after. God, why did this have to be a thing *now*. While he's *here*, dealing with *this* mess.

Peter exhales long and hot through his nose, feels the warmth and moisture of his breath squeezing through the cracks between his fingers as he continues to hide his face with a hand. He's been doing this a lot lately, putting his palm over his face. This is the longest he's gone without the mask since Gwen died. He feels raw, overexposed.

And he'll have to expose a lot more, to Wade, the very second this is over. He's pretty sure it'll be worth it.

In the meantime, the wait can keep on killing him by inches.

"With eyes that never look past this moment underfoot," Wade sings to the cardboard boxes, "and this reading in the cards is a caution to the birds. Sound, there's order in the sound, the sound that you don't know."

[OK, I was wrong. Having a soundtrack does NOT in fact make this any easier.]

{Agreed. Time to shut up now, big guy. This already looks enough like the breakup montage in a crappy rom-com.}

[We really should've just paid someone to do this.]

“No. Nobody’s touching Petey’s shit,” says Wade as he gathers up a stack of plates with love and care and then drops them from waist-height into the box on the floor. Some of them don’t make it. Eggs for the omelette, or something. “Besides, the price-point on that whole ‘white glove’ service was fucking ridiculous. I’ll pay ‘em to haul it, but if they think I’m doubling the bill just for them to *pack* it then they are *seriously* overvaluing the process of throwing shit into boxes.”

{Though they’d probably make sure stuff stays, y’know. Intact?}

[I love those breaky noises!]

“Drop dead, Fred,” says Wade, because too many obscure references delivered too subtly have gone undetected, or at least unremarked-upon, and he isn’t sure whether he feels sneaky-like-ninja smug about it or nobody-remembered-my-birthday disappointed about it. And ambivalence is a fucking annoying thing to feel, so, yeah, he’s annoyed.

“This is what he fuckin’ gets,” Wade adds, swiping all the random dorky office supplies off the wobbly desk and into the same box with the somewhat-intact plates. “Who the hell owns a *staple remover* anymore?”

[How do you even know what a staple remover IS?]

{Didn’t we use one of these to remove someone’s fingernails once?}

[Oh yeahhh... Heh, good times.]

{Not really.}

Deadpool opens the desk drawer so hard it pulls clean out of the desk, spilling most of its contents to the floor, which mostly look like trash anyway. He blinks at the drawer, shrugs, and drops it into the box as-is. His mouth is running but he’s not really talking, more just listening to himself.

“Little bastard,” he’s saying. “I pay his rent for like *months* and what’s he do? He fuckin’ abandons the place. I mean a shithole like this, he should’ve abandoned it ages ago, I mean look at this dump, but he didn’t, no, he waits until I’m the one dealing with the landlady and then leaves me standing here with his goddamn mess. It’s not mine, officer, I swear, I was just holding it for a friend. Yeah thanks, *friend*. Ungrateful, ‘swhat that is.”

{Still not convinced he even knows his rent got paid...}

[Yeah, it’s kinda obvious at this point, big guy.]

{It’s not the \$#!&hole apartment he abandoned.}

[It’s the \$#!&hole YOU.]

{Your weak attempt to disparage him and recast him as the bad guy is so transparently a self-defensive tactic to avoid dealing with yet another installment of Abandonment Issues Theater, starring Crippled Self-Esteem, that it’s too boring and predictable to see through to the end. Look, see? Even the writer doesn’t want to bother. The WRITER. And we all know how powerless he is to resist an opportunity to show miserable characters emoting at LENGTH. And HE doesn’t wanna stick around for this \$#!&.}

[Oooo, someone got SUMMARIZED...]

“That’s just cold,” Wade mutters.

{Eh. Not like any writer, anywhere, could make you any more miserable than you make yourself.}

{Hey, we help with that, too!}

Wade hesitates at the edge of Petey’s bed. Mattress on the floor. Like a dog bed. (Like Wade’s bed, before he started entertaining the fantasy of Spidey staying the night and decided to upgrade, just in case.) He wonders if Petey sleeps doggy-style out of preference or poverty.

[Leave it here.]

{Let ‘em toss it.}

He crouches, and pulls off a glove with his teeth, and touches the sheets. They’re the kind of soft you only get when they start to get threadbare. Again he wonders: preference or poverty? Wade puts the glove back on, and starts folding up the blankets.

He’s very careful about it, considering how mindlessly he decided to undertake the action.

{Oh, what the hell are you doing now.}

“I dunno,” says Wade. “But shut up and lemme do it.”

{Stop it.}

“Nope.”

{Why are you making the creases all tight and neat like that? Do it sloppy, like with the dishes and stuff.}

Wade doesn’t dignify that with a response. He was in the military. He knows how to make a fucking bed and how to fold up a fucking blanket.

{So it’s, what. A gesture of respect?}

Wade shrugs.

{You wreck half his other crap but you treat his blankets like religious relics?}

The blankets are soft, and they smell like Petey. Might be an instinctive thing.

{Ugh, \$#, that’s sickening. Why are you bothering with it at all?}

A shrug. “He might need it later.”

{So let him go on needing it.}

Like leaving Petey in need is even an option. Wade snorts.

{He doesn’t deserve this!}

“It’s just blankets,” says Wade.

{It’s the whole apartment! Why are we putting his shit in storage? He’s never coming back for it!}

“...He might?”

{He's never. Coming. Back.}

“We’re already letting the lease expire. Saving his stuff from the dump is like literally the least—“

{HE LEFT US.}

Wade sits still.

{He left us and we’ve done enough pining and eaten enough ice cream and shot ourselves enough times and... it’s time to be DONE. There’s literally no reason to save his stuff from the dump. You think the brownie points you MIGHT get for saving his freakin’ STAPLE REMOVER is gonna be enough to reel him back into your \$&(# piece of @&*\$ excuse for a life?!}*

[But we’re not doing it for us.]

Everyone pauses at that.

{Oh, you’re so sure about that, eh? And where the hell have YOU been this whole argument?}

[We’re doing it for Shortbus.]

{Wh... well — so the hell what?! He doesn’t deserve it! He doesn’t deserve anything else from us! He’s a taker, is what he is.}

“Oh, like I’m not a taker,” says Wade.

[It IS over, though. He might come back for his stuff but he ain’t coming back for us. We won’t get #&\$ outta doing this for him.]

{That’s what makes this %&@ing humiliating.}

“Get over yourself,” says Wade.

{No, big guy, we need to START thinking of ourself...}

[Yeah, we’re already three-fourths of the way through our Suicide Methods Bucket List. We need to come up with more ideas if we don’t wanna run out.]

{...and stop wasting effort on questionably romantic gestures for someone who was always gonna leave us and — oh yeah, ALREADY DID.}

[For real, dude. You always do this. It gets old.]

{Why do you always gotta debase yourself with this swan-song of pathetic, fawning self-sacrifice at the end of every single relationship? It never brings the other person back.}

[Yeah. Why can’t you just let it be DONE for once?]

Wade gives the gently, precisely folded stack of blankets an empty stare.

“I don’t wanna,” he says.

...This did not go the way I expected. I don't recognize this at all. I wasn't expecting a Deadpool scene at the end, either. Stay in school and don't do plot, kids.

Children's Fun Fact Science Corner: [Cuckoos are actually evil.](#)

Unrelated: I see a lot of people on this site pointing out their Tumblr accounts? I guess that's a thing? Yeah so okay... [chinashopbully](#) if you're nasty.

Next chapter: The plottiest of plot-oriented chapters. (Hopefully. I dunno what the hell's going on anymore.)

The Great Pretender

Chapter Summary

In which Bruce and Tony have some kinda dynamic, Peter is bad at planning, and the author doesn't know shit about completely changing huge chunks of plot when he's already mid-story and can't rewrite it all from the ground up because for once in his life he actually has an audience and that audience has already read the first half.

Chapter warnings: All kinds of manipulation, environment full of overall mindfuckery, lots of stuff about bombs, intrusive thoughts/unwanted perseveration, and pretty much the usual

Chapter Notes

I told you I was/am still working on it. Now do you believe me?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He's run out of things to try.

Bruce was already on the edge of doing something that'd instantly raise the Homeland Security alert levels. Roping the other Avengers in to help was supposed to increase his options, and thereby decrease his frustration, and thereby serve the overall purpose of world peace.

But of course, since Steve got pulled away on some international something-or-other, and Natasha already came and went with what seemed like maybe twenty minutes in between, only one Avenger has been around lately.

And of course, it had to be Tony.

"Have a little faith in the kid," says Tony.

"Says the guy who tried to hold him against his will 'for his own good'?"

"I'm never gonna live that down, am I."

"I'll forgive you when he does."

"Gonna be tough to know when that is if he's already drunk the Kool-Aid." Tony pauses, scratches the hair at the nape of his neck. Bruce can't tell if Tony's overall *greasiness* is from handling machine parts or not showering. Both, probably. "Okay so *that*," says Tony, "that came out wrong."

"Damn well better have," Bruce mutters, stalking away to the other side of the lab where there's Less Tony.

Tony's voice covers the distance a little too well. "All I *mean* is that if he really is chanting Oms

and preparing his body for the mothership or whatever then nothing — *nothing* — we do or say is gonna bring him back down to earth. We try to reach out, it'll just drive him away. Probably even prove some point about us outsiders being ignorant or hostile..."

"Not that I disagree," says Bruce, not as under-the-breath as he intended, "but where was this understanding when you were having your AI lock down the building?"

"And anyway I don't see how it's our business either way."

"How do you *not* give yourself whiplash?"

"Also," Tony says, "he has *powers*. It not like he's helpless."

Bruce stares. "...I don't want to sound like a broken record but—"

"So it takes me a while!"

The response sticks in Bruce's throat. Fact: Tony Stark sucks at people. Sometimes willfully, often not. Occasionally it's hard to tell which is which.

Bruce shuts his mouth.

Tony drops the torque wrench and reaches into the bag of blueberries dangling from DUM-E's claw (probably on JARVIS' orders). "Are we sure he's not, y'know. Undercover or something?"

"If he were onto something — if this were work-related he'd tell us."

"That'd be kind of a first."

"He'd tell *me*."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself."

"He promised," says Bruce.

"Well did he *pinkie* promise?" Tony leans back, and dear lord, when was the last time that face saw a razor? "Because that's the heart and soul of contractual obligation."

Bruce blinks at Tony's pointedly guileless face before deciding that it's not even worth the effort of counting to ten. He forces a smile. "It wouldn't kill you to be slightly less of a jackass about everything."

"That's never been proven."

He's going through a rough time, Bruce thinks. *He's going through a rough time. He's going through...* "If not us," says Bruce, "you know he'd at least tell Deadpool."

Something metal gets thrown across the floor when Bruce isn't looking; he jumps, presses a palm to his chest, sucks down the panic and swallows it away only through the aid of relentless practice. He stares at Tony in unbridled horror. *He's going through a very, very rough time, if he's pulling stunts like that.*

Tony gestures violently with one hand. "*One*, okay, I do *not* know that, and neither do you. We don't even know when or, more to the point, *why* the kid left his place, but I will bet you an entire goddamn *casino* that Wilson did something shitty to drive him off. Guy's the human personification of a fault line. Turns on a dime. Razes entire sections of the world at random.

Doesn't know pizza from roadkill and I've seen him go nuclear because he didn't like the color scheme of one of the new-generation iPhone releases."

"Meanwhile," says Bruce, because he's kind of in a *mood* now, "*your* response to being kidnapped was to spend the next few years building a personal army of weaponized armor and publicly claim ownership of world peace while *daring* known terrorists to come hurt your *very few* loved ones."

For a moment Tony turns to ice, unmoving and brittle. Only for a moment. Then: "I am a model of mental health," he says, breezing on. "*Two*, in the unlikely event everything is still sunshine and roses between spider-boy and Ol' Hair Trigger, why in the name of sodium pentathol would Wilson tell *us* anything? I feel like his weird daddy-issues hero-worship thing he had for Cap kinda went belly-up. Because, again, turns on a dime."

Bruce presses his thumb against a sudden sore spot on his forehead. "I can't believe I'm about to defend Deadpool of all people, but it's not like that was an unprovok—"

"Sure I mean, he might show up playing the *I've Got A Secret* game to try and squeeze a buck out of the deal, but he *hasn't*, which most likely means he doesn't know anything. But if you wanna track him down and interrogate him anyway, do me a solid and gimme a heads-up first because I've been meaning to test the new Hulkbuster armor."

"Tony—"

"*Three*, and goddammit Brucie I hate to say this, I really do, but it gots to be said — maybe Spidey Krishna has been a long time coming and has nothing to do with *anything*. Not us, not nobody, not no how."

"At the same time he's been trying to track down the source of serial suicide bombers? Come *on*, Tony."

"Coincidence. Fact is he's no more emotionally stable than the rest of us at the best of times and god knows we've all flown off our own deep ends before. Typically, dare I say it, at the most inconvenient moment? Joining a cult is, like, the tamest of all possible outcomes, let's be real."

Bruce feels a dangerous burbling in his chest. Shuts his eyes for just as long as it takes to breathe in once, all the way, through the nose. Two fingers against his inner wrist. Pulse slows. "Claiming coincidence without investigation is just plain lazy," says Bruce, with his eyes open.

Tony's expression sours. "You're paraphrasing. Badly."

"Every effect has a cause. You either care enough to find out what that cause is, or you don't."

Tony narrows his eyes and hums in thought. "Wasn't there something, somewhere, at some point, in some abrahamic religion, about the devil spinning scripture to his advantage?"

"Tony, I know you have a god complex, but comparing one of your pre-bandwagon rants to actual religious texts—"

"Pushing it?"

"A little, yeah."

"Well, we *were* talking about cults, so. My mind was just in the gutter already, I guess."

Bruce maintains a careful stoneface.

“Hm.” Tony flicks a blueberry in the air, catches it in his mouth on the way down. Again talks with his mouth full, which is sort of the Tony Stark equivalent of coughing and mumbling when you have to say something embarrassing. “Okay yes, my behavior before with the whole... y’know, kidnapping thing... was less than awesome and I was... *less right than usual*, okay? And now I just think we should leave him alone.”

“And I just think we should find a way to help him.”

“How, though? What’s he need?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because he’s not saying.”

Bruce raises his eyebrows, waiting for Tony to make his point.

“If he’s not saying anything then he’s probably not needing anything,” says Tony.

“Wow,” Bruce says. “I thought maybe you were just putting on a show so you could win the argument, but you really have pulled a U-ie.”

“Look, if you’re right, and this has nothing to do with spandex, and he really does want to be at Jonestown, then we’d be poking our way into his personal, poorly-guarded-secret-identity life and — aside from being just plain rude — probably fucking him up even worse in the long run, even if we did manage to get him to quit the club. And if *I’m* right, and he’s only there to work a job or... I dunno, whaddaya call it, a case? A mission? If he’s there to do Spider-Man stuff, then we’d be poking our way into *that* and probably fucking *that* up, which could get him *killed*. ...I feel like this is overall just a no-pokey situation.”

“As if you never benefit from people sticking their noses in your business from time to time,” Bruce says, looking pointedly at the blueberry bag and Tony’s hand reaching into it.

“How dare you. JARVIS is not a ‘people’. He’s better than that.”

“I’m not saying we barge in guns blazing. But we should try to do *something*.”

“Great idea, and here’s another one: How ‘bout we don’t.”

“Enough *don’t*,” says Bruce. “We’ve been *don’t*ing — or, *you* have been, rather — ever since—“

“JARVIS, music.”

“Which playlist, sir?”

“How ‘bout the GTFO party mix.”

Bruce isn’t sure how he immediately recognizes the opening of “Back Off, Bitch” by Guns N’ Roses — it’s very much not to his taste — but he does, and rolls his eyes.

It’s been over two months since both Spider-Man and reason fled Tony, and both have yet to come back. Been a little longer than that since Pepper left — physically left the Manhattan offices, since Tony refused to do so (the adult version of a child screaming *get out of my room*), and while Bruce sympathizes with her choices and with her need to be geographically removed from Tony, he *more than* sympathizes with Tony’s need for the anchor she provided.

These days Bruce can think of Betty without risking a news-breaking incident. If you’d asked him

as a younger man whether a person could experience *sadness* so visceral that their body interprets it as a very real threat to life and limb, his answer would've been different, and uninformed. He still thinks "sadness" is a hell of a way to describe the existential anguish that is Betty's absence from his life. Mostly, therefore, Bruce only thinks of Betty long enough to remember her name, and that they love each other — and that he has a good idea of what Tony's going through with Pepper being gone.

And if Bruce can spend as much time with Tony as he does, then he must have some kind of nebulous, intuitive understanding of both *how* and *why* Spider-Man would spend time with Deadpool.

...And if Bruce is projecting onto both Tony and Spider-Man, he can't help it. He's not the most empathetic person, but sometimes empathy, like rage, is unstoppable.

Hmm.

He creeps up behind Tony — already back to "tinkering" and hellbent on ignoring him — and putting his hands on his knees, leans over. His mouth is an inch from Tony's ear before Tony is even aware that Bruce is in his personal space.

"Mikey," says Bruce, more than loud enough to be heard over the music.

Tony swats him with a backhand without looking. "I CAN'T HEAR YOU, BUT YOU GO RIGHT ON AHEAD AND KEEP TALKING."

"His name's Mikey!" says Bruce.

Tony throws down the screwdriver, waves vaguely for JARVIS to mute the music, and flops his hands on his knees. Sighs, heavily. "Don't name it, you'll just wanna keep it," he says.

"He looks like a Mikey, too," Bruce adds.

"Of course he does, he's obviously an adorable babyface who was raised on wholesome cereal that's a part of this complete breakfast. And overlooking the question of how the hell you found this out, why in the fuck would you *tell me*?"

Bruce shrugs. "He's our friend."

"Yes! He is! Our friend who loves his secret identity! And you know me, you *know* I'll never be able to unlearn that. Why would you—" Tony squashes both hands to his face and takes a breath. "Look, I may be accidentally anathema to consistency, but I like to try anyway, okay? I've actually had to work very hard *not* to learn Spidey's IRL bullshit. Do you understand how hard that is? Do you realize how much he *sucks* at the secret identity schtick, Gumby?"

"Gumby. Because he's green. I get it."

"Seriously. Why."

Bruce shrugs. "To remind you that he's human?"

"I know he's human!"

"And that we all know you're still *very, very sorry* about what happened, but running from your guilt by switching from extreme overprotectiveness to an extreme hands-off policy is probably *not* going to solve any problems."

Tony narrows his eyes.

Bruce shifts his weight, settling back a little.

“Okay,” says Tony in a profoundly reasonable voice as he rises from the floor. His back pops, twice, when he stretches it. (His eyes bug a little, but he manages not to groan even though he clearly wants to.) “I’ll do some remote surveillance around the place and have JARVIS ping me if anything looks weird. I mean. Dangerous-weird, not creepy-weird. We’re already way past creepy-weird. So this way we’re doing something, but not sticking our hands in up to the elbow. Sounds like a pretty fair compromise to me. Coffee?”

It takes Bruce a couple seconds to realize he just won. “Great,” he says. “I mean, about the idea, not about the coffee. I know damn well that’s not decaf. ... You shouldn’t have any, either,” he adds, reaching for the cold pot and holding it out of reach before Tony can touch it.

“Of course I should. I’m a busy adult with many important things to do. And cocaine’s still illegal.” He opens the minifridge, and Bruce closes it with his foot before a can of Monster can escape.

Tony fixes him with a look. “You’re cruel to me,” he announces.

“Mm-hm. How many hours since you slept?”

Tony pretends to consider the question, then gives up. “JARVIS?”

“Thirty-one hours, sir.”

“Thirty-one hours, Brucie Boy,” says Tony.

“C’mon,” Bruce says, reaching for Tony’s elbow. “You’re going to bed.”

“Nah! Nahahah nnno!” He curls away. “You’re gonna have to wash the hell out of your hands if you want to put them anywhere near me.”

“Tony, you’re standing there in a cloud of your own thirty-hour stink and I seriously doubt if you’ve changed your underwear since the weekend. Don’t talk to me about germs.”

Tony hisses.

Bruce makes a grab for him.

“*Jesus*, your hands are cold!”

“Come on.”

“I need an adult!”

“Tony—“

“I’m not tired.”

“Worse than a nine-year-old...”

“Ow! Did I say you could—“

“Would you just—“

“Okay! Let go, alright! Hands off, I’m going, I’m going.”

“Go to bed, Tony.”

“You’re not my real dad.”

Somewhere in the lava flow of his subconscious, Bruce can feel the Other Guy roll his eyes, at both of them.

Drew’s body heat at Peter’s shoulder is, for once, more comforting than oppressive.

“These are bombs,” says Peter, and it requires zero acting skills to sound like small, in-over-his-head Mikey.

NOT in over my head, he thinks, firmly. *I’m the goddamn Spider-Man.*

Just keep swimming, just keep swimming...

“Not to put too fine a point on it,” Drew says with a shrug. His aftershave smells clean and good.

Peter likes to think that over the course of his life he’s become adept at extracting comfort wherever he can, even from ill-advised sources. Like sneaking good water from the inside of a spiny cactus.

He’s done it all his life. The school’s barely-better-than-nothing disability accommodations, without buying into the school’s insistence that there was something wrong or incomplete about him. Aunt May’s love, without Aunt May’s cartoonish misinterpretation of who he is. The Avengers’ medical support, without the Avengers’ SHIELD affiliation. The Brotherhood’s security, without the Brotherhood’s dogma. Drew’s body heat and aftershave, without Drew.

It’s not so hard, once you know the trick of it.

(The trick is, first, sorting the wheat from the chaff; second, turning off your emotions so that they’re not available to others for manipulation. ...Then, at the advanced level, playing along — typically this only means playing dumb — so that your would-be manipulators believe their machinations successful. That last one is the easiest step to do, but was the worst to learn. He learned it from Harry, the hard way.)

While it may not be the healthiest or happiest *modus operandi*, it gets him through. Being fragmented and scattered sucks, but it’s easier to slip through the cracks if he’s in a billion tiny pieces. He’ll just reassemble himself on the other side like he always does.

Usually does.

Probably.

Transporter accidents are vanishingly rare, he tells himself. He imagines Miles O’Brien offering a reassuring smile. He smells Drew’s aftershave.

“You’re making bombs,” Peter says, no inflection. Drew just sighs and, for a few more moments, says nothing.

The multicolored wires kinking their way across the center table look like bright cracks in the surface of reality. Peter wonders what’s on the other side of the cracks. It seems like the kind of

nonsense question that Wade would have a ready answer for. A deadpan answer. Like he'd long since poked his panda mask through those cracks, had a good look around, and shrugged.

"You know it's okay, Mikey," says Drew, pitching his voice just the right hypnotic way. "I promise, it really is. Everything's fine and there are good reasons for everything you see here. You're not ready to know those reasons yet, but when you are, I'll explain everything. It'll all make perfect sense, you'll see."

Presumably vicious lies, but delivered in dulcet Bob Ross tones. Peter finds himself slightly calmed despite the growing chasms between his feelings, his reason, and the rest of him. The air in the construction room is cool, the work lamps bright but not piercing, and there's a soft, lulling hum from an air duct in the west wall.

"This is all standard procedure," Drew says. "We've been doing this a looong time. There's nothing to worry about. We know exactly what we're doing, and we're going to make sure that you do, too. Once you know exactly what to do, you won't have to worry about mistakes. We're completely safe here."

"They're bombs," says Peter.

"Yes, but we're safe," says Drew.

"They're *bombs*."

"I promise it's okay," says Drew.

"Bombs only do one thing."

"You'd be surprised. Anyway they aren't gonna do that here. Ever. I promise."

"Then where?"

"When you're ready."

Peter hesitates. Drew's getting that *look* that makes Spidey-sense crawl, that means Peter is starting to ask the "wrong" questions (otherwise known as *exactly the right* questions).

"This isn't as shady as it looks," says Drew. "It's all tried and true and sanctioned by management. It's normal."

Peter folds his arms over his chest and lifts an eyebrow.

"Alright, well, normal for us," says Drew. His laugh is self-deprecating and magically expels some more of Peter's tension, even though tension is *goddamn well warranted*. "And I *will* explain everything," Drew adds. "For now, all you need to understand is that we're *absolutely safe*. Trust me. The construction room's been active for a good long while now, and everyone's got *everything* under control. It's all taken care of. Everyone is safe here. What we need from you right now is a little bit of trust. Can you do that, Mikey? Can you trust us? Without that, then we *will* have a problem. No one can concentrate if you're running around acting suspicious and making crazy accusations. It makes people nervous, and when people get nervous, that's when mistakes happen. You won't do that to us, will you, Mikey? We need you on our side. We really need you to be responsible right now."

Peter takes his new knowledge — *they're bombs, they're making bombs, these are The Bombs and he is trying to keep me quiet and passive* — and jabs it into his brain so the spiky pain of it will

keep him alert even while his emotions mellow out to the tune of Drew's voice.

He nods. Play along. Don't make them nervous. Don't get locked out.

And it's not that any of this *surprises* Peter. It's really not.

But until a moment ago, he'd been hoping that this entire Brotherhood *thing* has been nothing but a red herring and a way to keep himself fed. Hoping that he'd been mistaken when he first looked down at Drew's pamphlet in the diner and his brain — his prosopagnosic brain — decided to match one of the smiling faces pictured there with the screaming face of the first suicide bomber (*Eliot Landon, 46*) just because they had the same scraggly beard. It was the flimsiest of straws, and Peter had grabbed it and held on with both hands.

Because what else did he have to hold onto that day?

It seemed — and still seems — outlandish to expect a hunch like that to prove true, or his dubious lead to *actually* lead in the right direction. Crazy coincidence falling in his lap with perfect aim, when it's such a big city and lightning is so random? No way. Peter may be in great physical health at the moment, but it's been a long time since he was at his true best, and mystery solving was never his best subject at superhero school.

And he does have a storied legacy of fooling himself and seeing what he wants to see.

...But, to be fair, there's also his storied legacy of blundering into one-in-seven-billion situations that read like something out of a really bad sci-fi novella.

So until a moment ago, Peter hoped and half-believed that, although he's clearly been on the trail of *something* here, it was something completely unconnected to the bombings.

Until a moment ago.

Good god, this is his *life*.

This is his life.

Holy hamburgers, he really can't believe sometimes that this bullshit is his *actual life*. (The perpetual *am I dreaming* sensation of being in the house of the Bootstrap Brotherhood doesn't do much to help ground his reality, either.)

(This is another thing he wants to talk to Wade about, eventually. The outlines of perceptual reality and, when there's no way to know for sure what's real, how do you decide what to go along with and what to ignore.)

Drew pats him on the shoulder, but Peter's too clenched to react. "Nicholas will give you the orientation tour," says Drew before leaving the construction room. And part of Peter's brain — the same part that giggles when he's being shot at — remarks, silently, that it's too bad, Drew, it's too late, Wade's already first in line to tour Peter's orientation.

Nicholas waves him over, introduces himself and Keith with names only, gestures once at the only empty stool in the room. By the time Peter sits, he's become irrelevant to both men. Keith and Nicholas are reabsorbed in their fiddly little work, backs rounded, faces down toward their tables.

Wow, quick tour.

Nicholas has immaculate fingernails, and Keith looks like he deals with a lot of eyestrain

headaches. They both have their shirt sleeves perfectly rolled to the elbow, and they both seem disinclined to make conversation.

There's neither a Keith nor a Nicholas listed on the shoe-shelf cubbies. This means something, Peter's sure of it.

But then, after about five minutes, Nicholas finishes up whatever he's doing or reaches a good stopping point, and then he's laying things out on the table in front of Peter. He points at these items and names them and describes their jobs, and after every other object he snaps his fingers two or three times and says "Focus," even though Peter already is.

Peter's doesn't have any *fond* memories of bombs. He focuses hard.

Peter spends a lot of time in the construction room. His body odor mingles with Keith's and Nicholas' and becomes part of the ambiance. If he survives this experience, he'll have to switch deodorants because his current brand will now forever smell, to him, less like a fresh Irish spring and more like cognitive overload and domestic terrorism.

They don't give him a key to the room. Instead he gets a pager. Peter didn't know pagers still existed for anyone besides TV doctors.

They don't give him a schedule. Instead they beep him when they want him — and they do not want him on a regular schedule, or even a close facsimile of a regular schedule. They want him at all hours of the day and night, sometimes for 14-hour shifts, sometimes just for a few moments, sometimes calling him back only 45 minutes after sending him away. And then sometimes they seem to forget him completely for days at a stretch while he spins the pager round and round in his fingers and debates whether to leave the grounds if only for something to *do*.

He doesn't leave the grounds. They yell at him if he takes more than a few minutes to respond to a page, even if he explains he was pooping at the time, and since he literally never knows when the thing will beep, he needs to stay close just in case. Entire days fall to waste this way.

Peter asks them for some kind of schedule stability — even just a few designated hours when they won't call for him, or a few when they definitely will, just a crumb of consistency to survive on. Keith blinks at him in silence before turning away, the matter already forgotten; Nicholas makes a four-minute speech in which he rarely pauses for breath but in which, Peter realizes later, he says exactly nothing. For all that Nicholas seems to have a sort of closed-mouth nature, when he does open it? Yowch. Before becoming a Brother he may have been an aspiring local-government politician (or self-help guru, or Ponzi operator).

With rhetorical skill like that at his disposal, seems a little weird that they have Nicholas sequestered away in construction rather than out recruiting, or even doing both duties. Technical skill must be hugely valuable to them.

And Nicholas must have reported Peter's scheduling request to Drew, because Drew corners Peter later that night, while he's alone in the kitchen picking at leftovers from the meal he was forced to skip. There, Drew and his calm voice spin a creeping, growing, spiralling-out-of-proportion lecture — much longer than Nicholas' — that starts off being about the equality and dignity inherent in self-reliance and noble contribution to a collective cause. The usual. But then it wanders through the territory of selfishness and earning the clothes on your back and the inherent supremacy of satisfaction over gratitude, tangents into a none-too-subtle reminder of the state Peter was in when Drew found him, and eventually, somehow, results in Peter still hiding in an empty cabinet hours

later, the stainless steel never quite warming against his skin, sleepless for who even knows how long.

Questions are not smiled upon. Requests, it seems, are borderline profane. Okay, good to know. Filing that one away for sure.

After that, and probably for unrelated reasons, Drew sort of vanishes for about a week, as he sometimes does, leaving “Mikey” under the sole tutelage of Keith and Nicholas.

Peter does not particularly enjoy getting to know these two, such that he’s even able to do so. They’re considerably less polite than the other Brothers — unsurprising, since they’re never *around* the others — and teaching doesn’t appear to be a natural talent for either of them.

Keith’s shoulders never completely un-hunch. He explains what he’s doing only when prodded and only in clipped sentences. Mutters words from the lowest corner of his mouth. Treats speech like a nuisance. Peter can sympathize to an extent. But he also has to ask Keith to repeat himself a lot because of all the mumbling. Keith doesn’t seem to like that and after a while, when Peter enters the room, Keith makes the same face he makes when Nicholas farts.

Nicholas talks more normally — though, most of the time, still not much by “normal” standards — and has a little bit of Greg’s laissez-faire approach to everything. Or at least to everything that is not liable to explode. He’s easier to be around, but easily distracted from the fact that there’s another person in the room, and doesn’t seem overly concerned about whether or not Peter learns anything.

(Peter’s... not actually sure if he *is* learning anything. Nicholas shows him how to assemble and adjust components, but never explains what the assembled components are, or how they fit together to make something go boom. Without that context, Peter doesn’t have much of a grasp on the minutiae of what he’s doing when they do let him get hands-on. But the sequences of steps are easy to remember, lend themselves well to mnemonic devices, and are simple enough to perform — when given enough sleep, a steady hand and eye, and a quick flip through one of the dog-eared chemistry or electronics books lying around the room. He knows it all adds up to *bomb*, anyway.)

He certainly doesn’t miss Keith or Nicholas’ company when he’s off duty, even as his new erratic schedule makes it harder than ever to interact with anyone else, except in the most superficial, tedious, small-talk-ish ways. In other words, the most unpleasant ways to interact — and yes, he is including “battling to the death in the pouring rain” and “strangers booing and throwing garbage at you while you risk your life to help them” among that list of interactions.

Peter doesn’t especially miss most of the other Brothers, either, though he worries about the teenagers, who’ve switched from seeking him out to avoiding him (a pattern he’s much more familiar with). The alone-in-a-crowd type of isolation is starting to maneuver him back into his old mental patterns, and it’s reinserting the old familiar wedge between Peter Parker and The Rest Of Humanity.

It’s not a personalized pain he feels each time someone he used to talk to goes by with only the vaguest of polite acknowledgements, but it slashes him like another paper cut among the thousands he’s been accruing over his lifetime. The grief he feels has more to do with his overall circumstances than with whoever happens to be walking away. His disappointment that the Brotherhood is everything he suspected and nothing that he wanted.

He tells himself this is just bitter medicine, or something. Pain can be good. Right? Like how anger can give you a motivational edge sometimes? Sometimes pain can focus you. Applied carefully, it can help you beat lie detectors, certain forms of mind control, and if you’re both lucky and good at

it, the lies you tell yourself when you've been raising a cuckoo chick.

It's not like he ever really belonged here, anyway. It's not like he *wanted* to, for fuck's sake.

He's fine with this. This is fine. This is probably going to be *helpful* in the long run.

Be okay with this, dammit.

He may not miss the hollow companionship being sacrificed to the construction room's demands, but he does keep missing meals. Gradually more and more. He suspects this may be an intentional side effect. Whose intention? Who knows? Either way, it is unambiguously A Problem.

Ancient muscle cramps start to come back.

Once in a while he finds a plate of dinner in the fridge, covered in cling wrap and a post-it note that says "MIKEY". He does miss spending time with Greg.

These personal meals don't appear quite often enough.

One day he actually makes it to dinner, and he's poking holes in a pile of room-temperature steamed carrots with his fork when he realizes, suddenly and for no reason, that he's had a headache for days, and that Spidey-sense has been low-key buzzing for probably longer. Constant and creeping. Like one of those *really* old fluorescent lights that only gets bright and loud as it warms up, so the migraine sneaks up on you. Ambush. Frog soup.

His back is killing him, too. All those hours holding himself still and tight on a tall stool in a chilly room. If you don't count time spent recovering from injuries, he hasn't spent this much time sitting still since before he got bitten. Even as a teenager stuck in high school for seven hours a day, he still moved around between classes, he still did his homework on the ceiling and went out right after. Now Spider-Man has become... sedentary. Underfed, again. Poorly rested. *Stiff*.

So much for being in his best physical shape. That window's closed now. Another opportunity gone because he fucked up *again*. His chest feels tight.

Screw pain.

Pain isn't your goddamn friend and it doesn't make you strong or resilient. Pain means you've taken damage. Damage is not helpful for survival. Pain is only good when it's pointing out damage you hadn't noticed, that someone's distracted you from. Beyond that, all it does is make you feel bad and chip away at your focus.

He's been distracted. Now he's back on guard. He got the water; now it's time to stop poking the cactus.

...Peter gives himself so many of these "time to stop fucking around" pep talks these days. And yet here he is at the long table in the dining room, grateful just to catch dinnertime today, in the same seat he always chooses. With a headache and a knotty back and fatigued eyes that refuse to sharpen the focus on anything.

Natasha would take him to another room and sit him down and explain to him — as if he didn't freaking *know* — why operatives get pulled when they've been compromised.

Sometimes it takes him a while to act on his decisions, okay? And maybe he hasn't even *made* a decision yet, okay? The picture's still too fuzzy. Everything is blurry.

Peter is blurry. Like, existentially.

He leaves dinner early, and goes for his shoes. Pager be damned; no one can be on-call 24/7, not superheroes and not apprentice bomb builders, and he needs to get some fresh air in him. He needs to *move*, and... face it, Parker, to decide whether to stay the course and keep trying, or bail out and hand this one off to someone else because what is he even accomplishing anymore and honestly how much more of this can he *take*. He isn't even sure *what it is* he's taking, that's how turned around he is.

The wind will clean out his brain.

As he struggles his left heel down into the creased canvas of a Chuck Taylor that is begging for death, he sees one of the name labels on the shoe-shelf is coming loose at the corner. One of the MATTs. He balances lopsided between one sock and one half-on sneaker as he picks at the MATT with his fingernail. The label loosens, and peels. Reveals an older label underneath. ELIOT, it says.

Eliot Landon, 46, says his brain in reply.

Mr. Scragglebeard.

He holds onto the shoe-shelf with both hands.

None of it's surprising. (None of it except the fact that he was *right*. That he *did* accurately recognize the picture on the pamphlet.) So why does Peter feel so startled?

It's not just this.

It's Scragglebeard, and the construction room, and the pager, and the fact that he's been here for like *three months* so far, doing... what, exactly? Besides telling himself over and over that he has to do something?

All this has been right under his nose since that first hungry night, and on *some* level he's known it the whole time — so it's not surprising — but he's only now *realizing* what he's known the whole time, because evidence, and sleep deprivation, and the drama of his transfer to construction, and the rules and the all-caps signs and the ragged tick-tick-TICK-ticktick-tick from the clocks and the chanting and trying to *think* but to think *without* thinking of *the one person he really wants to think about* because every time he does it *ruins* all his other thoughts but how can he understand what he needs to *do* if he *can't think*...

Shock to the system, his brain supplies. *Wake-up call. Time to punch in. Yellow punch-buggy, no punch back.*

...Okay, so his brain's (*punch-drunk!*) mushy and mealy from the chanting and the ticking clocks and the dull living and the following orders and... all the myriad tiny ways he's been outsourcing the responsibility of Making Decisions and Feeding Himself.

All of which he did because...

...because he *had to*.

He needed the rest, he really did. He really, really did. He was too *tired* to keep adulting (much less superheroing) while everything kept falling apart. He was burned out in the most catastrophic way and he *needed* to rest.

He can't *afford* to feel shame about having that need.

He can't afford to feel shame about the steps he took in order to get that need *met*. His options were limited and he did the best he could.

He can't afford shame because that kind of thing only slows him down. He can't slow down now. He's Spider-Man. He's got shit to do.

Soon enough it's testing night.

Keith drives them out of town at 11pm on a Thursday in a plain white panel van that's so stereotypically sketchy that Peter feels like they all magically grow thin mustaches the second they get in it. There's only one passenger seat, in the front, and Peter, being outranked, has to ride in the back with the... equipment.

As a precaution the final step or two of assembly on all the bombs have been left undone and the components carefully packed in lots of bubblewrap and newspaper inside cardboard boxes, but the boxes (and Peter) are just bouncing loosely around the cargo area, shifting with every turn, stop, and go.

About an hour after they get past the city limits, the roads get a lot bumpier. Peter thinks about the abysmal rollover ratings of your average cargo van. He imagines the consequences of rolling a van full of unsecured explosives. He's torn between two battling impulses: on the one hand, to physically hold all the boxes steady with his hands and legs, and on the other, to cringe as far away from them as possible. As is frequently the case, he defaults to the useless middle path of passivity and just sits back there expressionlessly as if this were perfectly normal, holding his fingertips against the bare metal floor in lieu of a seatbelt.

It's nearly 1am and he's nearly asleep — he's always dropping off at all hours these days, though, so the time of night isn't really a factor in that — when the sudden silence of the engine brings him back to attention. The already chilly air feels even colder when it slips between his sleepy bones, and he shivers as they unload the van in the streaming light of the headlights. The road's unpaved. There are some trees, and frosty grass, and a genuinely exciting number of stars when he looks up, but past all those things, the darkness is so complete and claustrophobic Peter gets a little panicky, a little giddy, a little primal.

His brain isn't used to things being this dark without lots of solid objects around to block the light. A dark building? Whatever. But wide open air that's, somehow, just plain too dark to see? Eerie and disorienting. The childish simplicity of it — *It's just nighttime and there's no light pollution here, genius* — does nothing to settle his nerves. Nor does his implicit trust that Spidey-sense will serve as eyes to keep him from stumbling. Only when Nicholas passes him a headlamp and Peter can clutch the searingly bright LED in his hands as something real, something solid, does he begin to feel human again.

...Wait. Does this mean that he — Spider-Man — an actual, seasoned superhero who has been rushing into the fray for years — is afraid of the dark? And is only finding this out now?

No one must ever know.

He pulls the headlamp on and tightens the strap too much. It'll leave bumpy red lines across his forehead, but the pressure holds him steady.

Nicholas takes one of the cheap marble composition notebooks that Keith uses for chem formulas, longhand math, and random chickenscratch ideas. "Here," says Nicholas, jabbing it edgewise

against the meat of Peter's upper arm. "Take notes."

"On what?"

"You're familiar with the scientific method. You know how to make observations."

"Yes, but *on what?*"

Nicholas waves an arm across the spread of boxes. "Blast radius, decibels, detonation responsiveness, any other measurements we call out. General observations that seem significant. Dry puns, if you must. Just no doodles in the margins. Keith hates that."

"Wouldn't it be more efficient to use a voice recorder or, I don't know, film the tests?"

"Paper's easier to burn," Keith says as he passes by with a box.

Peter doesn't blink at the candidness. Keith is one of those people who's disgusted by the entire concept of varnishing.

"Got a pen?" Peter asks.

While he's waiting for the other two to finish setting up, Peter tucks the notebook under his elbow, shoves his hands in his pockets, and tucks his chin against his chest. Rocking his weight foot to foot adds to his powers of invisibility (or, of manipulating people into avoiding eye contact with him, whatever), but it also camouflages the motion as he flips open the burner hidden in his left pocket and thumbs through the memorized sequence of button-presses to activate the "voice memo" function.

During the rare few seconds he's been alone in the construction room (only twice now), he's used the shit-for-megapixels camera to sneak some shots of the setup in there. He can't figure out how to get the flash to turn off, though — and he has literally no access to the internet, so he can't look it up — which means he can't use it when there are witnesses around.

And there simply is no video function. It's maybe a \$20 phone, after all.

He hopes the battery holds out tonight.

They get back just shy of four in the morning, and Keith and Nicholas go immediately to bed.

Even though the adrenaline subsided during the drive back, Peter's insides are still rattled from the blast shocks, and his brain is still a whirling, existential mess from the darkness punctuated by blinding flashes of light. There was a moment or two, right after one or two of the blasts, when it was like Peter wasn't even *there* anymore. He's not sure where he was instead, but wherever it was, he came back with one hell of a stomachache and a tremor in his hands that spoiled his penmanship and still hasn't quite gone away.

The full tests only took about 45 minutes to run, and most of that was spent on setup and measuring the diameter of craters. He's not sure why he expected it to take longer.

Later on he'll make a point to try and get pictures of the notebook pages. He's no architect but he's truly uncomfortable with the destructive potential if one of these detonates anywhere near a support beam, or on a bridge. He doesn't know what exactly the numbers mean, but flipping back through the notebook to records from the last test, most of the scarier numbers have increased by

somewhere between 17 and 25%.

AIM would laugh and pat Keith and Nicholas on the head, but still. They've improved on themselves so much in such a short time, while working in a converted walk-in freezer. And their raw materials are still unassuming hardware-store basics.

Thoughts better left for tomorrow, or for whenever Peter's fresh again.

This right now is a rare opportunity: until Keith and Nicholas get rested up, he knows he won't be paged. His own body is screaming for sleep, but with his nerves all shaken *and* stirred, who knows what kinds of dreams he'd get stuck with if he were to lie down now.

So he keeps his shoes on and goes out.

He doesn't end up swinging like he wanted to. He needs to conserve fluid, and he can't risk being spotted. Instead he just walks, the movement foreign to his legs these days but reassuringly mundane. It's dark (not really; he has a whole new definition of "dark" now) and the streets are quiet — quieter than the house, in a way.

The wind is gentler down on the sidewalk. Maybe that's what he needs.

He checks the burner. Battery's down to 4%. He'll have to review tonight's recordings later.

Maybe that's a blessing in disguise, too. He can't take in any more data right now. At this point he's so scrambled he's ready to believe that the Brotherhood is being secretly run by a sentient piece of that plastic grass they use to keep sushi from touching each other. His brain needs a breather.

He tries to focus on simple things. The quiet, the gentle air, the subtle twisting motion of using his legs.

It works, for a minute.

Unbidden, he discovers nagging little thoughts in his brain pointing back to a conversation he once had with Bruce.

Something about asking for help once things reach a certain point. He can no longer remember what that certain point was supposed to be. He does remember that he *promised* he would ask for help.

Peter's pretty sure he's broken that promise by now. It makes his stomach hurt.

But then, most thoughts of before-the-Brotherhood make his stomach hurt. Peter isn't entirely sure whose fault that is. Probably the Brotherhood's?

Probably his own. Most things are his own fault, if emotions are to be believed.

It doesn't matter. Feelings and friendships can wait, can heal later. If more bombs go out into the world, it'll mean the kind of damage that can't heal. Stopping an armed criminal is always, always, always more important than nursing his own sense of alienation; none of Peter's priorities are clearer than that.

He has more than enough physical evidence in his collection by now to put away Keith, Nicholas, maybe even Drew. But even with his incomplete map of the Brotherhood's structure, Peter knows this wouldn't stop things, only cause a small delay in activity followed by increased vigilance that

would make it that much harder to well and truly end the threat.

He needs to get to “the management”.

Whether this would successfully end the bombings for good is questionable, but unless the Brotherhood is an esoteric little side-project of Hydra, Peter’s pretty sure you can rely on taking out the final boss as a means of tripping up a hierarchical organization composed of emotionally compromised individuals, allowing you or your allies to then fully dismantle it at leisure. (A spider wrapping up a fly for later consumption.)

The fact that Drew simply *suggesting* getting the management involved was enough to put Greg on his tiptoes during their argument in the kitchen is a pretty good indicator of management’s power, too. Greg doesn’t seem easily intimidated.

New mission: Find management. Stop management. Destabilize structure of prescriptivist and weirdly racist micro-community. Voila, no more bombings.

...Yeah. *Super* easy.

He wishes he had some paper. Even if he tossed out the pages right after, it’d be helpful to see his thoughts laid out in black and white. And if he’s going to keep thinking about this even when he’s trying not to, he might as well be as efficient as possible.

Playing the part of handyman savant may have gotten him into the construction room, but it doesn’t seem likely he’ll be able to get much farther on the same act. The fact that he’s been exaggerating his visible autistic traits pretty much guarantees he won’t be able to rise in the ranks any more than he already has.

Can he find a way to lure management down to him? He’d have to start drawing attention again, preferably positive attention, although the way Drew invoked management as a threat suggests that the right kind of negative attention could easily get Peter into the same room with them.

And that’s really all he needs, isn’t it? Punch out the bad guy(s), drop them off at the police station, clean, simple, get some help cleaning up the leftovers.

Right?

Right?

Yeah right.

But he doesn’t know how else to picture it, what else to do. There’s literally no way to know, and any guesses at this point are doomed to not be very educated. He needs to learn more about the management. Maybe not much more. Maybe just, is the management one person or a bunch of people? How hands-on are they? Do they ever visit in person, and for what reasons?

Peter remembers a time when taking a walk would result in daydreaming, not scrambling for actionable plans to further infiltrate and interrupt the power structure of a some kind of death cult.

What a stupid life.

The next morning, Peter decides which of the many possible risks he’s going to take first. As he buses his dishes from breakfast, he muscles his way through some small talk with Greg until the

kitchen's mostly empty.

"Who's the management?" asks Peter.

Greg's quiet for a while.

"The guy who makes all this possible," he says, unusually hushed. "But not someone you really wanna meet. Sorta like Zeus or something."

"Have you met him?" asks Peter.

"No."

"Then how do you know?"

"Drew's met him."

"Can I meet him?"

"Didn't I just say you don't wanna do that?" Greg holds a dripping scrub brush toward him. "Look, if you're feelin' idle enough to ask questions *that you shouldn't be asking*, then you can help with these dishes."

Peter starts on the dishes, and stops with the questions (for today).

He chooses his questions carefully, the recipients of those questions even more so. The timing is important, the context of what's going on in the immediate area. *Everything* is a factor, really: what the other guy is busy with, who the other guy tends to report to, what his relationship to Peter is like, what the overall mood of the moment seems to be, how quiet or rambly Peter's been, how long it's been since he came into the room, how he pitches his voice, what words he uses, how long it's been since he asked anyone a suspicious question. Questions are frowned upon. He quickly learns that asking specifically about management, even obliquely, always gets Noticed.

Peter treads so, so lightly. Everything requires Thought and careful execution, and nothing about it comes naturally. He's never felt so *too big* or *too clumsy* in his life. He feels like that one polar bear in the documentary, trying to sneak up on a dozing seal across thin crunchy ice.

Days tick by. Drew returns from wherever it is that he disappears to, and Peter redoubles his caution.

Peter's beginning to be able to smell his own foul stress-sweat. But he's doing it.

He's doing it — somehow — among endless, free-floating thoughts of Wade, because let's face it, given a long enough timeline there's essentially nothing that doesn't remind him of the man. It's only gotten worse since moving from a bunk to a single room. The sounds of other people breathing nearby, their scents, their late-night bathroom trips, as irritating as they often were, did go a long way to keeping Peter's base animal loneliness at bay.

At first he thought the bedroom — it came along with his shift to construction duty — was some kind of reward for having a more delicate role in the Brotherhood, but he's since come to the conclusion it's mainly a means of enabling his slavery to Keith and Nicholas' odd hours without disrupting the sleep or lives of the others. The room's barely bigger than a closet; that should've been a tip-off.

It's given him a more secure place to hide his Spider-things, four small walls to crawl on, and a tiny space where he can try to remember who Peter Parker really is. Unfortunately its solitude also lends itself to relentless memories of Wade (and also, in a roundabout way, to significantly less pleasant memories of Harry), prodding Peter to the edge of a depressive episode, and boy howdy if *that* isn't just about the last thing he needs right now. So in that sense, the private room has proven to be more detriment than perk.

Also detrimental is how it leaves him alone with his more work-related thoughts, day and night and those weird, foggy, sleep-deprived times when he can't tell which is which, but still can't drop off to sleep for all the screaming and foaming in his brain.

He's no longer entertaining the fantasy of "just gimme five minutes alone with him" as a valid solution to this increasingly complicated problem.

Spider-Man has no illusions about what he does. Not at the end of the day and not in his darkest hours. Web up a purse snatcher and drop him off with the police, maybe leave a note if there's time (there's never time anymore), and twenty-four hours later the guy's back on the street again. Possibly committing the same crime. Sometimes even on the same block.

Nothing he does about non-powered criminals is permanent, or admissible in court, or even something that leads to *arrest* most of the time. At best it's a band-aid fix with a side of psychological deterrent.

Street-level superheroing is stopgap. That's a far cry from ideal, but so is everything else in life, and Peter's chosen to be okay with that (when he can be) because when the only alternative is complicity...

Complicity is not an option. If he has the executive function to leave the apartment, then he *has to do something to help*, period.

But this time is different. This crime isn't a desperate one-off or a bad habit. This "management" guy isn't a petty crook or a genetically altered mustache-twirler (probably). Rumor has it he's in politics and that's why he's never around, and Peter has no reason to believe otherwise. As reluctant as people seem to discuss him, if they can nonetheless widely agree on a rumor, there's probably a fair deal of truth to it.

And that makes this guy the worst kind of bad guy — the kind who both looks and thinks of himself as legitimate — like Norman, before the... — and he needs to be *exposed* and to feel the full force of the judicial system. He needs to get taken down by cops and courts, not masks and powers.

Which means Spidey needs evidence this time. Hard, admissible evidence. Every hassled police chief from every procedural drama he's ever watched in his life is chiding him across the top of a coffee mug: *You wanna put this guy away, you go get me the evidence.*

Even if there's a paper trail or an incriminating email somewhere, Peter wouldn't know where to begin looking. Or how he'd get it without committing a B&E — and he's not sure, he only vaguely remembers something like this from a movie, but he *thinks* that anything he finds by means of criminal activity would have to get thrown out. Maybe that's not the case, but as long as he has the slightest doubt about his evidence, he's not willing to risk making a move on it.

(He scribbles another note on his mental Top Priority To-Do list, below *Stop the bombings* and *Talk to Wade* and *Find new housing* and *Sleep for four months solid*, to *Make an effort to learn about criminal law*. Maybe one of those Harvard courses you can take for free online.)

More voice recordings might be enough, but. Also they might not. His pocket muffled the audio from testing night pretty bad, so the words are hard to hear. They're *really* hard to hear, actually, even for his ears, even when he remembers some of what was said.

Plus he'd have to be present for an in-person conversation with management. Plus he'd need to have the burner on him and charged, and carrying it around all the time is too great a risk. Plus, how do you prove in court that a badly distorted voice belongs to a specific person?

No, Peter's not going to risk leaving this one up to a matter of whose lawyer argues better. Management is powerful, having, if nothing else, the entire collective resources of everyone in the Brotherhood, and god only knows how many other connections outside of that, especially if he is a politician. Once the law gets involved, they have to be able to take him out in a single blow, so to speak, because if he gets a chance to walk away from trial, the first thing he'll do is shore up his defenses on every possible front, and it'll be that much harder to get him behind bars.

And speed is a consideration, too. The longer Peter waits, the likelier another bombing. Worse than any of the previous, if the tests are any indication. At least he can keep a direct eye on the building process so he'll know with plenty of warning when another bomb is going to be ready. In theory, anyway. Sometimes the other two prefer to work without him, especially Keith. They could have entire projects in the works that Peter doesn't know about. So yes, speed is important.

(That, and he's just... he's not sure how much longer he can hold onto himself, being here, doing this. This whole entire *mess* has become so big that to hold it all inside his head means there's no room left in his head for, you know, *him*. But that's beside the point. This isn't about him.)

He needs Definitely Absolutely Admissible? Okay. Video footage sounds pretty damn admissible to him.

Just need an opportunity, and a camera. A small, sneaky, durable camera.

...Funnily enough, Peter knows exactly where he left one of those.

He kind of wishes he didn't. The unexpected sideswipe with Bruce in the Costco that one time was hard enough.

And as desperate as he is to talk to Wade — if they run into each other *now*, then everything he's doing here, all his plans, the entire shape of his mind will be ruined. What little focus he has left will dissolve, and then the entire mission will crumple in his hands. Once he starts feeling those... those things, he won't be able to stop. They'll fill his brain and they'll muscle out all his plans and all the pieces of the puzzle.

This is not a thing he suspects; this is a thing he *knows*. He absolutely cannot see Wade yet. Or anyone from his regular life, for that matter.

Besides, it would just plain hurt like a bitch.

But he needs the stupid camera, can't afford to buy one, and if he goes to Tony's building for a new one then he would *definitely* have to interact with people he knows. Wade's place, as much as it stings to even picture it, stands a solid chance of being unoccupied and encounter-free.

Necessity, as always: the mother of willpower.

He just got off a five-hour shift with Keith, who was looking a little worse for wear. Nicholas is still laid up with the cold that's been going around. No one's going to page him until the morning, probably. Now's going to be as prime an opportunity as any.

His closet of a bedroom, unlikely enough, has a narrow half-window that a more average-sized man wouldn't be able to get through.

Peter really should be conserving his web fluid since he doesn't have the resources to make more, but he has to be back ASAP if he doesn't want to run the slightest risk of his absence being detected, his metro card has no balance left, and there's too many miles between here and there to hoof it.

God, it's been a while since it was just him and the air.

But the swinging doesn't center him the way it usually does. The wind dulls his thoughts, but not the ache that drives them.

It never feels quite right in plainclothes, he tells himself. The wind doesn't hit your body the same way. Your movement's more restricted. Of course your throat's going to get a little tight. Stupid plainclothes, he tells himself. Stupid biology. Stupid job. Stupid Peter.

This is such a longshot. Peter remembers very clearly the part where Wade said he'd have to abandon the squat as soon as Peter left. Hell, it's the whole *reason* Peter vengefully dismantled the drone in the first place.

...He is still, somehow, completely unsurprised to find everything in more or less the same place, along with evidence that Wade's been spending time here.

He's even less surprised to find that the box of his own belongings is nowhere to be found. Which means the camera's not here, either. Trip wasted.

Peter stands in the dark living room, smelling the air, remembering the smell, missing what it meant.

Trip wasted. Clock's ticking.

Peter stands there, not leaving.

It's a creepy feeling, like the place is being actively haunted. (Maybe by him. Maybe he's the ghost here. What a twist! Someone call Shyamalan.)

Just being here again, alone with the evidence but not the man, Peter feels viscerally aware of who and what Wade *is*. His instability, his inconsistency, his noise, his masks upon masks upon masks. The primordial vortex out of which comes Scary Deadpool and Fun Deadpool and Wade and Mario Kart and murder. Peter feels it for the first time. Not just the first time in a while, but *the first time*, period.

It reminds him of his first few tries at web-swinging. Of being aware, suddenly, that there are three dimensions at his disposal. The world didn't change; his way of moving around in it did.

Wade is, left to his own devices, the opposite of everything that should be good for Peter.

...So how the hell has Wade always managed to be so good for Peter? Sheer determination was always a factor, but Wade has the attention span of a bumblebee, and—

Speaking of attention spans. Peter follows his own gaze to the spot of bright color on the kitchen counter.

A tiny plastic Spider-Man lying face-down next to a grease-stained chinese takeout box.

A cockroach zips away across the counter when he picks up the Spidey. A lone key dangles from the ring attached to its head.

The U-Storage logo is stamped on one side of the key. The number 17 written on a crooked bit of masking tape on the other side. ...Unit number? Aunt May always told him to never write what lock a key opens on the key itself, because if you lose the key that makes it easy for anyone who finds it to steal from you.

(Who in their right mind would steal from Deadpool, though.)

Peter pushes the key deep into his pocket and turns to go. *No one* in their right mind would steal from Deadpool.

Peter is clearly not in his right mind. But he knew that already.

At the same time, he knows that *if* Wade ever notices and confronts him about this, Peter will probably be able to argue his way out by saying that the Spidey keychain is basically the same as writing Peter's name on it, and if his name's on it, that means it's his. Wade will either find that "logic" irrefragable, or will let Peter get away with it anyway because Wade lets Peter get away with basically everything.

Peter isn't even sure why he Needs to take the key. He'd like to be mysterious and say *instinct*, but the truth actually lands somewhere in the hazy patch between *superstition* and *wishful thinking*. The specifics aren't even important this time. He only knows it's a shoddy reason.

But it's a young Saturday night and he's already taken the risk of sneaking out. If he's not going to go clubbing like a proper young person, he might as well do *something* stupid.

The phone book tells him where the nearest U-Storage is. Not far. There's probably time.

He makes it in twenty.

Security is nonexistent beyond a barbed fenceline, some floodlights, and two prominently displayed dummy cameras. Yeah, well. If Wade rents a storage unit rather than outright buying an entire warehouse, he's going to go cheap, isn't he.

Peter considers just breaking the lock on unit 17 even though the key is jabbing his leg through his pants pocket. Again, not sure why. Just an impulse. He resists it this time, and uses the key.

And... as *unsurprised* as he was to find Wade's stuff still around when it was supposed to be gone, he feels an inversely proportionate level of *holy shit* at seeing his mattress — *his* mattress, from his *apartment* — propped up against a wall in the dark shed.

His fingers seek out a lightswitch. There aren't very many boxes, but then, Peter never had very many things. None of the box tops are sealed. He peeks into them one after another, the more skittish part of him expecting each one to explode the moment he touches it. He's been spending too much time around bombs.

This should be at least a little bit creepy, finding all his stuff here. A little invasive. It's not, though.

Hell, Wade's probably had Peter's address since the lease was signed. The fact that Wade never visited, unannounced or otherwise, is... strangely courteous.

That's Wade for you.

The fact of... this, all this being around him in the tiny, cold metal room instead of in a cold metal dumpster out back of his old place... yes, that's Wade for you. That's Wade for *Peter*, at least.

Peter sticks to his upright mattress, his weight hanging carelessly out into space, body perpendicular to the ground, and closes his eyes. He spends some time completely forgetting why he's here, and then completely forgetting about time passing. He begins to doze, feeling chilly and wondering why he doesn't see his blanket anywhere. He waits.

Then he startles awake when he remembers that there's nothing to wait for, that Wade won't be coming home, because this isn't Wade's home, and anyway he's not trying to see Wade. Not yet.

Then he remembers *why* he can't see Wade yet, and literally slaps himself across the face. "Wake up," he says. "You can have feelings later."

Business business business. Beep boop.

He unsticks and jumps to the floor, and with rigorous efficiency he rifles through the boxes as if he'd packed them himself (though he wouldn't have broken quite so many things). He unearths the drone camera, grabs some of the other little salvaged bits, and on his way out he accidentally slams the rolltop door too loud behind him in his eagerness to prove how *rational* and *ruthless* and *pragmatic* he is.

He flinches at the catastrophic noise, but no one comes to investigate with a flashlight. This... is not the kind of place that would waste money on a security guard.

After a moment Peter locks the door, pockets the key on his way out, and — what the hell — stops to get a quick gas station coffee before making his way back to the Brotherhood. Not like sleep was really on the menu anyway, especially now that he's got to get this gadget operational again. Time's running out, and dreaming's not an option. If he dreams about Wade now, the mission is toast.

But when he reaches his bunk, crumples the empty coffee cup, and lays all his pilfered goodies in a neat grid on the bedspread, instead of getting to work, he leans forward, rests his brow against the clammy wall, and muffles his own sobs against his sleeve for about forty-five minutes. By then it's dawn, and he still hasn't been paged, so he blows his nose, hides the contraband, and goes downstairs to garble his way through the breakfast-chanting. He doesn't eat much.

Wade gets to the neighborhood just in time to spot Petey soaring into view from the other direction and spidering his way up to a window in what Wade has come to not-so-affectionately call the Tyler Durden Building.

He tamps down an urge to fist-pump and holler a "booyakasha".

[Here, finally, we have a glimpse of the rare Shortbus Bird outside of his native habitat. All the weeks of waiting and watching have finally paid off.]

It's good to see Petey get outside. Growing boys need fresh air and exercise.

{Good to see evidence he's still ALIVE.}

"So it's been a while since he got out," says Wade. "Maybe there was a Star Trek marathon livestream he didn't wanna miss."

[And WE didn't hear about it??]

{Spidey dying would be more likely than THAT. You've been thinking the same thing anyway.}

"Was not."

[Don't lie to us, big guy, it's embarrassing.]

{Trying to gaslight OURSELVES, are we?}

"When in Rome."

[...throw a toga party?]

{No one would come.}

[Starting to miss the repetitive suicides.]

"They weren't very productive."

[And this is?]

"We know he's alive now, don't we?"

{And that he's not kidnapped again.}

Something flashes through Wade's periphery, dragging his attention along like soggy driftwood caught on a fish hook. Wade blinks. Shakes his head (making a motorboat noise) and blinks again.

{The \$&@# was THAT?}

[Get it! Go on, boy, fetch!]

He's up and running after the... whatever, the *thingy* before it occurs to him to argue. He'd think he was chasing a bug or a hummingbird if its buzz weren't so high-frequency and mechanical.

Luckily it doesn't seem to be avoiding him too hard, instead maintaining some kinda holding pattern, with Petey's window at the center. It stays away from the ground, too. Luckily Wade's already on the rooftops.

It swoops away when he makes a grab for it, but only a little bit (responding to a motion sensor maybe), and it's fast to resume its holding pattern. Wade steps into the flight path and puts out his hand, holding his breath too, for dramatic effect.

It flies right into his palm.

[AND THAT'S THE QUIDDITCH CUP!]

{And that's what a serious design flaw looks like.}

It is tiny and fluttery and aggressive like a caught dragonfly. Most people wouldn't have even seen it — or if they had, would've mistaken it for an actual dragonfly.

[Oh, you mean like we've been doing for a couple weeks and wondering what the hell kinda dragonfly would still be that zippy in goddamn November?]

{Thank you, Captain Exposition.}

Ah, but there's the camera lens.

Much improved over the last batch, which were so generic they looked like any old commercial drones. This one looks and acts more like the Golden Snitch on cocaine, minus the golden, plus a few sharp edges that whirr and slash Wade's fingers over and over as it tries to escape. Vicious little fucker.

Stark must've actually put some effort into these. Maybe over a late lunch one dull Tuesday.

He pinches its four little razor-dragonfly wings between his fingers, in effect disarming its defenses, and blinks stupidly at the Stark logo its curved underbelly. Sticks his tongue out at the lens.

"You better not let one fucking thing happen to him, Shellhead," he says, because there's no way it *doesn't* collect audio too, and releases the wings. The drone slices into his hand two more times, temperamentally, before arcing away and adjusting to a different holding pattern around Peter's window.

{Boring.}

[Catch-and-release is for hippies. Kill it!]

"If he sent one," says Wade, "he sent a bunch. Don't feel like catching 'em all."

[And that's why you've never managed to play a Pokémon game all the way through.]

{Okay so what now? We gonna leave Shortbus in Stark's OH-SO-CAPABLE hands?}

[Stark's almost ended the world more times than we have.]

Wade rolls over onto his back, onto a bunch of little things that crunch. Why. Just why. Why is the roof crunchy. How is it that roofs manage to collect as much debris as the sidewalk? Things don't fall *up*.

[Okay no but seriously. What now?]

"...Finish the stakeout?" Wade tries.

{We already got one Spidey-sighting today, and caught the Snitch on top of that. That's like 400% more luck than we've had in a couple weeks.}

"Hm. I could... break in, club him on the head, throw him over my shoulder and carry him out?"

{He wouldn't respond very well to the caveman approach.}

[He's a modern girl.]

Wade grabs a handful of roof-grit and lets it sift through his fingers. "Home?" he asks. Stupid-sounding word. "I kinda wanna binge *One Punch Man* again."

{Dude, don't even pretend like you'll be even THAT productive.}

"...Ok."

He just walks back. There's no reason not to. There's no hurry and there's no point in trying to maintain stealth anymore.

He hates this stupid apartment. Factory. Squat. Shithole. Whatever. Hates it and its stupid memories and the fact that he never forgets the things that he *wants* to forget.

[But... you DON'T wanna forget.]

“Zip it.”

He hates the fact that he hates it, and most of all he hates himself for keeping the light on against all better judgment *just in case* Petey decides to come back even though—

{He won't.}

“Yes, THANK YOU for finishing that obvious sentence for me, I couldn't possibly have done it without you.”

{Don't reject the only friendly voices you can always count on to be there.}

“‘Friendly’?! ”

[Yeah, big guy, don't worry! You still got us!]

“Lucky me.”

Wade drags Petey's blanket — still folded, though badly rumpled — out of its box and into the living room. He smooths it over the arm of the couch, tosses his mask aimlessly across the room, lines himself up, and lets himself fall forward into the blanket.

[Tiiimber!]

{That joke gets funnier every time. Really.}

He faceplants, and inhales. The smell still hasn't even started to fade. Somehow. Depite how many hours Wade's spent with his face shoved into it, or how gross the top layer of fabric is getting from all the crying and snotting he's been subjecting it to.

[Love me, love me, pretend that you love me...]

“Shaddap,” Wade tries to say. The faceful of Petey-blanket makes it unintelligible, but it's not like boxes in your head need to hear you right in order to understand what you say.

[You love that song.]

“Not anymore.”

{Yes you do.}

“...Yeah.”

[Leave me, leave me, just say that you need me.]

{I don't care about anything but you...}

[Pathetic.]

Chapter End Notes

- Sorry I couldn't break the long wait with something more exciting than what ended up being mostly a setup chapter. It was this or nothing. Please be gentle.
- No seriously, since last we spoke I consecutively came up with and decided on several completely different plots. I hope you like my final answer because I'm not changing it again and, although the trajectory of Peter & Wade's relationship has stayed consistent throughout all these permutations, almost nothing else has, and honestly I have no idea what I'm doing anymore. (I don't know why I worry so much, either. I know nobody's really here for the plot of all things.)
- I wanna thank *every single person* who has commented, left kudos, bookmarked, recc'd, floated over to my tumblr, or otherwise been awesome in my general direction. I'm sorry I haven't responded to comments in a while. It's pretty much your standard case of Can't Social In This Way At This Time, and my responsiveness will continue to be iffy for the foreseeable future. But I did read your comment, definitely more than once, and it gave me good fuzzy happy baby-otter feelings.

Next chapter: Bombs away! Hopefully a lot sooner than 11 months from now.

Suicide Life

Chapter Summary

In which everything goes ass-over-elbows, Tony's good timing is not an accident, and the author doesn't know shit about narrative cohesion.

Chapter warnings: dosing, capslock, nonsensical grammar (shush, it's for *~effect~*)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter's brain being what it is, doubts keep trying to insinuate themselves into his thoughts. (Is it gaslighting if you're the one doing it to yourself?) It's faster to just reality-check these doubts against a third party than to try and lecture himself into believing conclusions he's already reached (effectively, retracing his steps up a very steep hill).

Ted is sweeping the front hall to the rhythm of the big grandfather clock by the stairs, and Peter comes in to pretend he needs his shoes. His hand "accidentally" brushes off the MATT with the loose adhesive, revealing the ELIOT beneath.

"Hey, Ted? Who's Eliot?"

Ted stops sweeping, and after a moment of blinking (also, eerily, in perfect time to the big grandfather clock by the stairs), comes over to peer more closely at the label Peter's pointing to, then at the fallen label Peter picked up from the floor.

"Robert needs to get on top of this stuff," says Ted, taking the fallen MATT and turning it over in his fingers. He looks at the wall, a little vaguely. "It has been kind of damp lately. All the adhesives are losing their stick. Sign fell down in the bathroom this morning, too."

"There's no one here named Eliot," says Peter.

"No, not anymore. Shush now."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know exactly," says Ted. "He was out on an errand and got hit, or his Über crashed, something like that. Some kind of car accident, I remember that much. Very sudden. Just this past summer, not too long ago. Not too long before you found us, actually."

Because that doesn't fall under the category of "suspicious timing" at all. "Then why don't you remember?" says Peter.

Ted taps his broom-bristles against the floorboards and shrugs. "We don't talk about it."

"Why not?"

"We should stop talking about it now, actually."

“But why?”

“Well—“ He gets that awkward, shifty look that people get when a young child asks where babies come from. “No one’s told you yet?”

“Apparently not.”

Ted clears his throat and drops his voice to a low murmur. “We don’t speak the names of the dead,” he says, scratching his nose with the back of a knuckle. “Because they’ve already shed their meaning.” He licks his lips. “Do you see?”

Oh yes. Peter sees, perfectly.

The best person to go to when you want to ask dangerous questions is Keith. His abrasive disdain for sugarcoating (and for, you know, basic manners) leads to just about the only straight answers Peter can get around here, at least when it comes to taboo subjects like dead Brothers or who the higher-ups really are.

And it sure *seems* like Keith isn’t overly concerned about keeping secrets, at least not from a fellow construction room denizen. He doesn’t shut Peter down the way the others do — or, well, no more than he shuts Peter down literally every time Peter tries to communicate with him about anything, even if it’s just “could you please pass me the needlenose, no, not that one, the one with the yellow handle.”

It’s suspiciously convenient to be sharing such a private workspace with such a candid source of information. He’s leery of a possible trap — set for Peter or for Spider-Man, or both — but the bait is too tempting to turn down.

Peter’s careful to keep his Keith interrogations as subtle as he can, though, formulating each question and planning out how to ask it for hours or days beforehand, to be sure it comes off as innocently curious as possible. Above all he tries to make it seem *organic*, a natural continuation of conversation or events, that’s the key.

If Keith suspects anything, he gives no indication. For all Peter can tell, even if Keith did suspect something, it’s questionable whether he’d care enough to do anything about it. He seems startlingly non-indoctrinated compared to everyone else. He might even be a potential ally — though, as fervent and wishful as that line of thought is, Peter’s not dumb enough to push his luck *that* far.

Drew cycles away from the house and back again, and the day after he comes back, he pages Peter to the construction room in a markedly cheerful mood. Keith and Nicholas aren’t here at the moment. Peter doesn’t overlook the fact that this is the first time he’s ever been completely alone in a room with Drew. Nor does he overlook the fact that the room Drew chose is a near-soundproof, windowless bunker with a very lockable door and an impressive array of objects that could kill you. Reflexively he moves to tug on a webshooter that isn’t there.

Peter sits on the stool Drew indicates, even though it’s Nicholas’ spot. The seat has a bit of a tilt to it.

For about eight seconds, Drew just smiles toothlessly down at him as he shifts futilely on the crooked seat.

“How’ve you been holding up, Mikey?” asks Drew. “Are you keeping up alright with what Nicholas and Keith have been showing you?”

Peter nods.

“Yeah, Nicholas has lots of good things to say about you and how fast you’ve been learning. Keith has... less to say, but that’s just his way. That’s alright. Keith has his own way just like you have your own way, Mikey, and we understand that here. We understand the best we can, anyway, and where we don’t understand we at least try to accommodate. Because you’re important to the Brotherhood, Mikey, you really are. Your contributions haven’t gone unnoticed. Seems like you really belong back here in construction. Keith and his quiet way set aside, you know, *overall* everyone feels like you’ve been fitting in back here real well, Mikey, real well. Do you feel like you’ve been fitting in here?”

“Real well,” says Peter, internally cringing at the chopped adverb but knowing how important it is to bring his strongest echolalia game to the table.

“Good, good,” says Drew, and this smile has a lot more teeth than the first one did. When the tension in the room rises a few degrees, Peter is *certain* it’s not his imagination. He tries to take a deep breath without looking like someone who needs to calm down.

Drew tips his head to the side and squints thoughtfully at the edge of the table. The smile sticks to his face just out of habit. There’s nothing friendly about it. “You have a good mind, Mikey. Always hungry for more. Like a little kid that can’t stop soaking up all that good new information — why’s the sky blue, where do the garbage trucks take the garbage, do cats go to heaven. It’s a good trait to have, Mikey, real good. It helped you do well in kitchen and it’s helping you do well in construction. But you know...”

He shifts forward, away from the table he’s been leaning his butt against, and puts a careful hand near (but not against) the components on the table. “This is good work here,” he says of the components, shifting his conversational track. It’s a particularly empty compliment; Peter’s learned enough by now to know that even if the work *looks* clean at first glance, you can’t really tell just by looking. Drew’s just ego-stroking, lazily. He’s working up to something.

“Real good,” Drew mutters, then pulls his gaze away from the equipment. “How would you feel about doing a demo?”

“What?”

“Everyone thinks well of you, Mikey. I think well of you. At this point your potential looks just about unstoppable. The Brotherhood’s privileged to have you. Seems about time to introduce you to the management.”

Peter almost falls off the sideways seat. “To the...?”

“Well, you know—“ and here Drew’s voice takes on a slyer edge “—heard you’ve been asking around a little bit about him.” (Spidey-sense rushes up his spine, and then is gone.) “Been distracting people a little, actually. Upsetting people, even. Been a little too disruptive, Mikey. Even Keith mentioned it, and that’s really saying something, if Keith thought it was worth opening his mouth over, you know? And it just—“

He leans back again with a forced sigh. “It’s not that there’s anything wrong with learning or wanting to know things, Mikey, it’s really not. That’s exactly the kind of thing that’s making you so good at doing what you do these days. It’s good to *have* questions, Mikey. But *having* questions and *asking* questions... they aren’t the same thing, really. It’s just — well, it’s *certain kinds* of questions that aren’t so great. And I mean for everyone. I’m talking about the whole group, you know? What’s good for the whole group.” He waggles his fingers in the air, a vague gesture of

miniature chaos. “Distracting. Raises people’s blood pressure when there’s nothing really to worry about there, kid, not really. It’s not good for people, not good for their health, and it’s not good for the group.”

“I’m — I’m sorry,” Peter says. “I didn’t — I didn’t know. I didn’t know—“

(Peter knew.)

“Nono, of course you didn’t, Mikey, it’s fine, it’s fine.”

(Peter totally knew.)

“It’s fine as long as it *stops*, right now. And I understand, Mikey, I really understand how tough it can be, not knowing what’s going on behind the scenes. That’s what makes government programs and all that type of thing so dangerous, is everything you don’t see, what they really think of you, why they really do the things they do and where they really put their money. It’s nasty business, Mikey, downright nasty. But we don’t do like that here, Mikey, that’s not what the Brotherhood stands for.”

They each look at a different spot on the floor, lost in their own busy thoughts for a moment.

“Anyway. Now that that’s cleared up,” says Drew. “Management’s a very busy man, as I’m sure you’ve heard by now, but he does like to get to know us — and the construction boys in particular — he does like to know everyone, shake hands, and measure the cut of your jib himself. You know, when you’re ready. And all this is to say, Mikey, we all think you’re ready. Do you think you might be ready, Mikey?”

At those words, something inside of Peter recenters. “I’m ready,” he says.

Drew lifts an eyebrow at him.

“I’m sure of it,” says Spider-Man.

For another moment, and probably for dramatic effect, Drew holds the stare. Then his awful smile climbs halfway up his face again. It changes the shape of his skin near his ears. “I thought so,” says Drew.

I’m sure you did, thinks Peter.

“Now, he is a very, very busy man, Mikey, way too busy to come all the way out just for a meet-and-greet, no matter how pleasant the company. The last test you boys ran ended up producing some good results, though, real good, am I right, good enough that we think it’ll impress him. What do you say, Mikey? Want to put on a little private demonstration for the big boss? I’ll be right there with you, of course, he and I have been meaning to talk over some things anyway, so you won’t have to go alone. If that were even possible, I mean. Can you even drive? Well, whatever, doesn’t matter. But me and Nicholas and Keith, we’re all feeling pretty eager to show you off. How’s that sound to you, Mikey?”

“Sounds great.”

“You sure? You sure you’re ready to run a demo with your own two hands? It’s basically the same thing you did before with the test, except with an audience, but it’s still a real big responsibility, Mikey, real big. You’ll be setting up and detonating all on your own, but Nicholas has been teaching you how to do that all properly, right? Yeah? Okay. I’ll have a play-by-play all written up for you to go off of, but everything else, the full execution, that’ll be all up to you. You’ll have to

follow protocol yourself. Think you can take all that on, Mikey?"

"The process seemed straightforward enough," says Peter, "and I know the equipment."

Drew hums. "Good man. I know you'll do us proud. Nicholas can help you get organized and ready. And *I*... I'll try to set up the meeting."

Yes, you do that, Peter thinks, flapping with equal parts satisfaction and nerves as Drew ushers him toward the door so he can lock it behind them.

He looks around the kitchen, still flapping in erratic little bursts as he starts making eleven million plans at once.

The camera's been ready for nearly a week.

Peter's got it hooked into the original memory card, also salvaged from the drone, and just in case the hack job gets damaged during the demo, or the whole setup is lost somehow before Peter can retrieve the data, he also fixed up the original drone transmitter to send a second copy of the video feed straight to the (surprisingly generous) storage space on the burner phone in thirty-second increments. He'll stash the burner somewhere in the city, leave it behind, and have himself a handy-dandy off-site backup.

...He thinks. He's not positive. The jury-rigged backup system was a last-minute inspiration and he hasn't had a chance to test its actual functionality.

So he's really banking on *not* losing the camera. He's already spent more time trying to choose the perfect hiding spot for it somewhere on his person than he spent working on the tech itself, and he still hasn't decided where it'll go.

Peter's been getting visibly twitchier as the days until the demo fly by; Drew only hesitates for a minute before giving him permission to take a walk and clear his head on the morning of.

The air is the kind of cold they'd call "bracing": teetering on the balance point between discomfort and invigoration. His breath is visible, but only just. The shapeless yellow sweatshirt he's wearing was provided for him from the group closet (near the shoes). It has no pockets, no hood, no pictures or designs or patterns on it (decorated clothes are a no-no in the Brotherhood). What it does have is that Febreeze-and-old-lady smell of a thrift shop, and that Brillo-pad texture on the inside where the fleece has aged poorly. It could stand to be a lot warmer, too. Peter doesn't much care for it.

The sun hurts his eyes. He hasn't gotten out much lately, especially not during the day.

Peter squints against the light, sighs out a frosty breath, and starts calculating the surroundings.

One time on a team-up stakeout, Wade decided to kill the time by infodumping at him about daily stealth techniques, how to maintain covers and safe houses, how not to get caught on security cameras, that kind of thing. (The more recent revelation that Wade knew all along where Peter lived puts that conversation in a whole new context, one that's both touching and embarrassing.) The part about what elements make for an effective dead drop seemed a bit off-topic, since Spider-Man doesn't work with a handler or... anyone, really... but it was interesting nonetheless, so the information filed itself tidily away in Peter's brain.

It has come in handy more than once, when he needed to stash his Spider-suit outside the

apartment and didn't want to waste fluid by webbing it to something.

And it comes in handy now, as he scouts a place to drop not only his Spider-things, but the burner. He'd prefer to seal it in webbing on a water tower or something — this would be worth spending the fluid on, even though his supply's already pretty low — but the webbing tends to block out things like satellite relays and cell service (please don't ask him how he knows this).

He settles for the roof of a hardware store with windows so filmy he can't tell whether it's even open for business anymore. Which probably means it isn't. There's a narrow gap up the wall in the back, mostly hidden behind a rigging of pipes, so he can crawl up maskless in the sunlight without being too noticeable from the street.

At the top, he finds a colony of thick-legged spiders with their webs strung along the south face, and Peter takes this as a good sign. It's been an unusually warm November, but not so warm that spiders should still be alive, so there's either divine intervention or something extremely nefarious at work here, and for the sake of *sanity* Peter's choosing to believe the former.

He puts his things in a double-layer of plastic grocery bags to protect them in case it rains, and secures it near the spiders (where most people wouldn't want to go), arranging it all to look like the bag was blowing in the wind and got snagged.

It's simple, and old school, but so James-Bond-satisfying. The real mission hasn't even begun yet but Peter's feeling awfully good about things as he climbs back down. No wonder Clint's always so pleased with himself even when he's just being an idiot. Peter always thought it was just a natural personality thing — and maybe it is — but it turns out that doing spy stuff makes you smug, too.

So smug that he *almost* forgets to take special note of where the building is. Peter gives himself a little slap for that one. Wake up, yo.

It's a heated debate in his head for a while, but he decides against getting a coffee. The potential edge it could give him isn't worth the risk of crashing later. His nerves will keep him awake just fine.

In large part, Peter expects to arrive at the meeting with that haunting feeling of having forgotten something important. That's what tends to happen when he's been prepping for an encounter (or trip, or midterm exam, or doomed job interview) for a long time, both as Peter and as Spidey — his brain sort of gets into the habit of Getting Ready, so that even when the time comes and he *is* ready, he still feels the need to prepare. Feels dazed and empty-handed when there are no more preparations to make.

But when night falls and he reaches the back of the kitchen and sees Drew there, unlocking the construction room door, and Spidey-sense lights up like a fuse — Spider-Man is so freaking Ready To Do This it's all he can do not to spraypaint his mouth silver and scream *Witness!*

He tightens his teeth and his fist.

Drew opens the door, turns around, then puts on a smile. "Right on time," he says. "The van's out front. Let's load 'em up. All these boxes along here, and the ones on the table."

Peter tries to ride in the back with the cargo again, but Drew *insists* he take shotgun. Drew's wearing too much aftershave. Thankfully Drew also turns on the radio, and leaves it on the first station. Peter picks threads out of the hem of his shirt to keep himself from half-consciously touching the camera to make sure it's still secure. It's fine. He fixed it on with a twist-tie from a

bag of rolls in the kitchen. It looks just like one of the shirt buttons. It's not going anywhere. It's fine, Parker, leave it alone. Don't draw attention. Distract yourself.

The radio static hisses around some bland pop song. He can't remember the last time he listened to FM. (With Aunt May, probably. She used to listen to the radio a lot, especially in the kitchen, especially the first year or so after Ben died, before she started taking those evening classes at the community center.) There seem to be more commercials now. Peter's eyes absorb the passing headlights and streetlights and glowing signs until they feel wide and staring and unable to move, like an owl's eyes.

They reach the suburbs, and a red light, and Drew turns the volume almost entirely down on a desperate-sounding ad for a new-and-used Kia dealership, zero percent financing for the first six months, no money down that's right NO money down. "You hungry?"

"Huh?"

"We might as well get some grub while we wait."

"Wait?"

"Oh, and I hope you've enjoyed the view, because once he joins us I'm kicking you into the back."

"What?"

"How about Denny's?"

"Denny's." Peter scratches his fingernails against the grain of the seatbelt at his shoulder. This is not how he was hoping for the mission to start: wordless, his brain nothing but a fart noise.
"What?"

Drew laughs — the connotations of the laugh are unreadable — turns into a parking lot, and cuts the engine. "C'mon, Mikey," he says, still laughing as he opens the door. "Unless you'd rather wait in the cold van and go to demo on an empty stomach."

Peter jumps when Drew's door slams, prompting another snort of laughter from Drew, the sound muffled through the windshield. He unlatches the seatbelt. The scary thing about not knowing why someone is laughing is they might be laughing at you. At least half the time, it seems, they are. Given that this is *Drew*, it shouldn't bother him — it certainly doesn't bother him when the one laughing is Doc Ock or a generic ATM mugger or any other baddie — but then, Peter's out of uniform tonight. The suit has always been more than just a suit...

Also he's pretty sure he's never voluntarily *lived with* a bona fide villain before, and apparently doing so affects his job performance. A thing to avoid doing in the future. Note to self.

(Wade's more like an antihero, so don't even argue with me, brain. An antihero or, like, one of those self-described "villains" who's really not, like Megamind or something. Or... a reformed antagonist, maybe. Prince Zuko. Something. But not a villain. We fought some in the very beginning, but he's never been — he's never been an enemy.)

Peter stomps his feet on the pavement to try and wake up, to call his brain back home. Should've had that coffee after all?

Oh wait. Denny's. Denny's has coffee. He double-checks that he locked the van door and crosses the mostly empty parking lot after Drew, eyes darting.

Calm down, Parker.

“Sure, because nothing bad *ever* happens in a Denny’s parking lot at ass o’clock,” he mutters, fingers rubbing the edges of his belt loops. Spidey-sense is no louder than it was in the van, though. It’s just garden-variety anxiety.

“Garden-variety anxiety,” he whispers. “Vaaa-riety aaang-ziety.”

Jesus. You ever have one of those nights where you’re just, like, *extra autistic*?

Better to get his fill of it now, though.

The diner lights are several notches brighter than necessary. Drew has a breakfast scramble and Peter has coffee and a muffin — “You *sure* you don’t want anything else, Mikey?” and he sounds genuinely concerned.

“I ate before we left,” Peter lies. “I didn’t know we’d be stopping somewhere.”

“If you’d asked, I’d have told you.”

“It didn’t occur to me that this was a thing to ask,” Peter says, a trifle annoyed despite everything. “When Keith and Nicholas took me, we just went straight to the site and straight back. I just... figured.”

Drew turns his face to one side and breathes in through his nose like he’s fighting a fit of irritation of his own, then situates one of his arms across the back of his half of the booth, an eerie callback to their first meeting. Peter has a sudden craving for pie, and at the same time, a sudden urge to be sick and crawl under the bolted-down table.

“Tonight’s gonna be different all around, Mikey,” he says — voice louder, but thinner, like it’s straining to mask something. “Tonight’s not about the work, it’s about the people. Sure, we get some extra data in the process, but that’s just gravy. We’re not trying out anything new, we’re demonstrating what we’ve already got. Including *you*, Mikey. I mean we’re demonstrating *your* worth to the Brotherhood. So you’d better take this seriously and be on your toes, Mikey, you’d better focus. You’re not just representing yourself. You’re representing our ability to make good judgments. You’re representing *my* judge of character and whether or not I’m still the best person to make those kinds of calls. You hear me, Mikey? You understand what I’m saying? Puttin’ a *lot* of faith in you here, Mikey, *lot* of faith. ‘Scuse me, miss? Could we get a little more coffee over here? Thank you so much.”

Peter covers the top of his mug with a palm. “No thanks, I’m good.”

Drew goes stiff, like a dog about to lunge.

“You *sure*?” he asks, like a growl.

“I’m sure,” Peter says.

Drew still doesn’t move.

“It’s okay,” Peter says, slow and long on the syllables, like anyone would who’s trying to calm down an angry dog. It doesn’t appear to work.

“Don’t want you drowsy on the job, Mikey.”

“Any more than this and I won’t be able to think straight,” says Peter. “Plus my hands’ll shake.”

Drew holds his stare for another two seconds, then yawns and looks up at the ceiling. “Alright then,” he says with a light smile. “You know yourself better than I do.”

Ain’t that the truth, Peter thinks. “Speaking of liquids,” he says, and starts sliding out of the booth. His butt’s left a sweat-print on the vinyl seat. “I should hit the bathroom now.”

In privacy, he checks and rechecks (and then once more for luck) that the camera’s still there. Without the burner to confirm its receipt of data, there’s no telling for sure whether the camera’s operational, but at least it’s still there and still pointing in the right direction.

Nothing’s gone wrong, but more importantly, at least one thing is almost definitely going right.

The edge of the sink is wet but he holds onto it anyway, doing one of the breathing exercises Bruce showed him.

The mirror has dark circles under its eyes. Almost dark enough to look like a punch to the face. He hasn’t looked like this since he was flunking out of college. Back then Spider-Man’s performance was... middling-to-fair, at best. He needs to do better than that tonight. A lot better.

Accomplish more than ever with fewer resources than ever has been the game objective of his entire adult life so far. At least he has practice.

Including practice at failing.

Maybe he should go ahead and have the extra coffee.

It should be Natasha doing something like this, not him.

When he’s done his business and wondered for the millionth time why pink industrial soap always smells That Way, he’s a little surprised to find the coffee hasn’t been refilled in his absence and is still the same degree of lukewarm. He looks up and Drew quirks an eyebrow at him.

“Better finish it up, Mikey, he should be here soon. Help me keep an eye on the parking lot, will you? Lemme know when you see headlights.”

Peter peels back the seal on another creamer and drops it in the coffee. The colder it gets, the more cream it needs. He sips with one hand and crinkles the empty creamer container in the other and looks out the window while Drew plays with his phone.

“He’s meeting us here?” Peter asks.

“Mm-hm.”

“Why *here*?”

“Open twenty-four hours, staff is used to looking the other way, and safer than a Waffle House. Besides, who doesn’t like breakfast at midnight.”

Peter immediately decides that as soon as he gets another job he’s going to save up and bring Wade to Denny’s, because if that all doesn’t describe the perfect dinner-date...

Wow, get ahead of yourself much, Parker?

Granted, but all this time *waiting* is bad for his nerves, which is bad for his job performance —

even more so than letting himself think about Wade — so anything that keeps his brain occupied right now... anything to keep his pulse from ratcheting any higher. Anything he can get is anything he'll take. And if that's trying to figure out how best to romance Wade Wilson, so much the better. It might even prove actionable in the future. In an ideal world.

The coffee stops flowing into his mouth. Empty. A slow crawl of sugar slurry slides along the inside of the cup.

Oh.

He puts down the mug and crinkles the lightly textured plastic of the creamer container between both hands now, rolls it between his palms, stares out at the floodlit lot between the window-blinds. The lights make his eyeballs vibrate subtly. "Why?" he asks.

"Hm? Why what, Mikey?"

"Why are we meeting him here instead of there? Does he not know how to get there?"

"Of course he knows. He's the one who chose the place. He *owns the land*. We do it this way so if anyone happens to wander by there, his license plate isn't on the scene. It's dark, so any claims that someone saw *him* at a suspicious scene would be subject to reasonable doubt, but a plate number is harder to lawyer your way out of."

That's... the closest Drew's come to admitting how *very illegal* all of this is. Peter's quiet, except for his insistent heartbeat. Which pumps a bit harder.

Drew reads his expression and snorts. "Don't pretend you're surprised, Mikey," he says; *don't even think about backing out on me now*, says his tone of voice. It is a very *Harry* tone of voice.

Peter's hackles stiffen. "I'm not."

"Then relax, okay? Have some pie. There's room in the budget."

"Fine, whatever."

"Hey. I hope you're not planning on having that attitude in front of the management, Mikey."

"Of course not."

"I mean it."

"You want me to eat the pie, I'll eat the pie. Just not cherry."

Drew smiles a meaningless smile and waves for the waitress.

The only other customers — a trio of bloodshot college-aged kids who've been giggling their way through the munchies in the far corner — roll to their feet and mosey out the door. Their car engine squeals to itself as it idles, then after about twenty seconds it quiets down and pulls away very slowly. The parking lot goes still again.

The Oreo pie looks and smells atrocious, slouching sideways on the plate, stark white and near-black and not really the kinds of colors you'd normally think to put in your mouth. The creamy chocolate part is developing condensation beads. Peter tries a bit, and his tongue and all his senses clamp around it, reflexively, even though it's gross, like someone who can't let go of the wire electrocuting them. His heart thuds so hard it *hurts*. Panic attack revving up maybe? Stupid Drew.

Stupid pie. *God* he hates this man so much.

God, he hates this pie.

After the first gummy swallow, though, he can't stop. The feel of it going down his throat — the coldness, maybe. The smoothness. The tiny pockets of water trapped inside the goo from freezer-burn.

He hunches over it and forks it in and then barely restrains himself from licking the dirty plate. Oh my actual christ that was horrifying, and he wants more. Hashtag-thanks-I-hate-it.

“Wasn't that worth it?” says Drew.

Peter is thinking about milkshakes and how amazing one would be right now. His heart's still going-going-going but all the other fear-like feelings are gone. Ah, yes, well, sometimes food makes panic attacks stop? Especially if it's cold?

But also he thinks he might be sick any moment now.

But if that were true, if he were really about to get sick, then he wouldn't want more food, would he, he'd hate the very idea that food even *exists*, and he doesn't, he actually really wants more food right now, cold food, which means he won't get sick, which means he needs a milkshake. Now. Right now.

He waits with a fidgeting leg for Drew to finish the text he's writing so Peter can ask if there's room in the budget for one of those grasshopper milkshakes, oh god those things are so good he can't remember the last time he had one.

Oh wait yes he can. Aunt May. He went out for lunch with Aunt May right after he told her he'd been put on academic probation at ESU and didn't think he was going to be able to come back from it and was going to have to drop out of higher education completely forget the doctorate forget the *bachelor's* and he was so sorry he was literally a failure did she feel let down was she so disappointed in him, and instead she took him out for lunch to show him it was okay, and she didn't resent him wasting all the money she'd already put up for tuition and books, and she still loved him. The mint milkshakes were her idea and he didn't think he'd like it but then he did and then he cried into it and she reached over and put her hand on his forearm even though he didn't like that but she was trying and she was being the bigger person like she always was and *he* was the one who fucked up so he didn't say anything about her hand on his arm and just cried harder and why the *hell* would he want another one of those milkshakes now?

Vanilla. He should just get a plain-jane vanilla shake with no memories attached to it.

Ohhh, and dip *french fries* in it, yes. Hot salty crispy bubbling with grease. Right in the dip. Boink.

Wow, that is a very long text Drew's working on there. Peter tries to bounce his leg harder but it's already at Maximum Bounce so he lets the other one join in the bouncing as well. Their bounces are not in time with one another and that is very strange, it is very strange that the asymmetry of his legs isn't bothering him.

Instead what's bothering him is how the skin on his arms feels a little numb; the muscles underneath feel juddery and weak, but when he tries to nudge the window-blinds out of the way so he can distract himself from the wait by watching the empty quiet parking lot again instead he accidentally pulls the blinds the wrong way and too hard and the whole thing comes crashing down on top of them.

It lands full on Drew with a loud thin rattle and knocks over the glass ketchup bottle and Peter's out of the way too fast to get hit with it and — how he does not end up on the ceiling is a freaking mystery and — he only registers the waitress' startled yelp a few seconds after she did it and he stretches out his hands to try and — disentangle Drew from the broken blinds that are so *loud* and oh my god were the — were the outlines of his hands always this *sharp*? Why is everything so *sharp* it *hurts*

"...hohide mmrllr, hohh hrrmrnrr..."

"WHAT?" says Peter.

"Just go outside, Mikey, go outside and wait by the van."

"SORRY IT WAS AN ACCIDENT."

"There's no need to yell, just go outside and wait by the van."

"BUT? BUT I'M NOT YELLING?"

"*Outside*, Mikey."

"CAN I GET A MILKSHAKE."

Drew glares up at him so hard it makes Spidey-sense shriek and jump backwards.

"OKAY OUTSIDE," says Peter, and almost slams into the poor waitress on his way to the door. His gait's... off. Incorrect. His heels don't want anything to do with the floor; his toes refuse to leave it. Fine. Okay. He can work with this. He shuffles. Oh wait his knees have forgotten how to bend. Really? *Really*, knees? You've got *one* job to do...

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah, guy just gets panic attacks sometimes. Sorry about all this. How much to cover the blinds?"

"I dunno, I've only been here two weeks, I'll have to call the—"

"MANAGEMENT," Peter says, hand on the door.

They both turn and look at him. His heart stops beating altogether for a second, then resumes palpitating. His armpits prick in a terrible way.

"I'LL JUST... be... outside," he says — forcing the volume down, and — goes out into humid air that he swears doesn't have enough oxygen content to support a normal human metabolism much less a superpowered one that is apparently on the verge of the worst panic attack in the history of ever or possibly an actual heart attack, yes a real honest-to-god heart attack, that would explain the numbness and also why he doesn't feel actually, y'know, panicky, or even anything at all beyond normal anxiety. Malnutrition leads to heart problems doesn't it? He could be having a heart attack it is *plausible*. And what if he's having a stroke or a whatsit — an aneurysm — that's basically the same as a heart attack right just in your brain and that's why his brain is doing this? Can you do that can you have a heart attack and a brain-stroke-aneurysm-thing at the same time? Can they be caused by the same malnutrition thing?

And he ate great for a couple months but before that he spent a few years basically starving in slow-mo and lately he's had to go back to not-quite-starving but still not enough food or sleep and wait doesn't sleeplessness make your brain start actually eating itself and that's why insomnia

makes you seem brain-damaged because you *are*? Ohmygod is this it is *this* how he dies? After everything he's done with his fucking *stupid crazy mess* of a life and all the violence is *this* bullshit how he dies? Death by self-eating brain and possible simultaneous heart failure at the age of twenty-four despite superpowers yep that sounds like the ol' Parker Luck alright.

And why is it so freaking *hot* out tonight is this climate change in action because it's November it's definitely supposed to be autumn-going-on-winter now and he could see his breath this morning but this feels more like the muggiest night of August but they left August behind didn't they, August is trapped in amber forever somewhere back in Greg's kitchen or the construction room never to be retrieved and

Peter rolls up his sleeves but the air that touches his sweaty arms sure *feels* like autumn and his breath is a little bit visible on the floodlit air, and he doesn't know what to make of all this conflicting information, particularly his cold-hot arms, so he leaves one sleeve up and pushes the other back down to try and balance it all out and would be crying now if he had any tears left, but he doesn't because all the moisture in his body is coming out through his sweat glands, and *holy shit what's that sound*

He spins back toward the Denny's and the sound is the whoosh of air and the scrape of the door's rubber seal on the welcome mat. Drew's on the phone. Who's he calling it's like one in the morning what could — oh he must be talking to the management or someone, yeah okay, that makes sense, something makes sense, okay. Okay.

...No. No, not okay. Drew's telegraphing danger as he comes nearer and his questions keep getting interrupted before he can get them out and his face does the falling-rock thing that faces do when the person on the other end tells them someone just died. He's shaking slightly his body is shaking and so is his voice — that or Peter's eyeballs are vibrating — or maybe both — when he finally says "We're on our way. We'll do what we can." And then he points off to one side of the lot. "Van's over there, Mikey," he says.

"WHAT'S GOING ON WHAT happened," says Peter, realizing midway through the sentence that he's shouting again and trying not to.

They get in the van before Drew talks again. "There's a situation," he says, and his key misses the ignition twice before slotting in. Peter's seen too many scary movies because he's surprised the engine starts right away rather than screeching uselessly for a few crucial seconds while the killer catches up and —

"WAIT WHAT ARE WE RUN — running from," says Peter.

The van dips around the corner — gosh it corners about as well as a rubber raft in a hurricane — sound of cardboard-sliding-across-metal from the back — and the needle hits the 40-mph mark before Drew remembers to turn on the headlights. "It's not like that," yells Drew over the straining engine.

Peter slaps his hands on the dash and sticks, braces himself against the erratic motion. "Not like what? You said there's a situation what's the situation."

"They have him."

"Who has who?"

"Someone found out. Someone on his staff, I bet. I just bet. *God* you can't trust a *damn* soul, can you, Mikey. No one but your Brothers."

“Is this a philosophical discussion or what because if so I *really* don’t think I’m up for that right now my chest feels funny?”

“Breathe, Mikey. Breathe, okay?”

“I don’t think this is a panic attack I don’t know what it is? I’m kind of concerned can you have a stroke and an aneurysm at the same time? And where are we going?”

“We need to fix this. We have to fix — we’re — we’re gonna fix this.”

“Fix *what*?”

“He’s being — he’s been taken — they’re holding him — they—“ Drew does one of the breathing exercises that Bruce does all the time, though badly. “They took him and they’re demanding — it doesn’t matter what they’re demanding, they won’t get it, we won’t give it to ‘em. We...”

Drew’s face changes. Peter looks out the windshield and checks in with Spidey-sense but there’s nothing there.

“*Fuck ‘em,*” says Drew and it is absolutely the first time Peter’s heard him use language like that. Drew’s eyes get narrow, then wide, and he glances at Peter, then over his shoulder at the supply in the back. “Absolutely fuck those guys, Mikey, fuck ‘em flat into the ground. We got a full array, got a real sampler platter back there, and we promised management a demo, didn’t we? We’re gonna — we’re gonna go in there, Mikey, we’re gonna fix ‘em up good. The bastards.” He shakes his head, teeth glowing in the headlight kickback, a blacklight monster in a button-down shirt and ugly tan blazer. “Ohhh ho yes, Mikey, *fuck* yes, let’s go in there and—“

“Go in—? What is even going *on* Drew goddammit you asshole—”

“Mikey. *Mikey.* He’s been taken fucking *hostage*, Mikey, okay? You get that?”

“Management?”

“Yes, Mikey, management. He’s in there and they’re — they want the hardware, Mikey, they want our supply and all our notes and they want it for his *life*, do you understand?”

“Of course I understand, I know what a hostage situation is, I’m—“ —*a frigging moron who was about to say “Spider-Man”, ohmygod Parker get a grip and stop sweating, even if it is a heart attack and even if your mask is on a rooftop far away then you can still save a hostage and die on the job like a goddamn samurai.*

Drew palms the sweat off his own upper lip and blinks a lot. “Okay,” he says. “Okay, okay okay. Listen. Listen, here’s what we do. You’re disarming, Mikey, you got that face, you know, that innocent-lookin’ face, that boyish charm or whatever, so you go in and you see if you can get these assholes talking, just distract them, okay, just keep their eyes away from the windows.”

“Drew my brain and heart are both exploding I dunno if I’m up for neogtia—“

“‘Cause *you* know about the man-sized pieces that’ll punch a hole in a wall and that’s all fine and good but *I* know about the heavier-grade stuff, I know the stuff that’ll do more than punch a hole in the wall, it’ll bring the whole place down around their ears, Mikey, it’ll. It’ll. They won’t get away with this or anything else. They’re coming for us and they will *not* get a chance to regret it. If they — if they’re onto the management then they’re after the *entire Brotherhood*, Mikey, d’you get that? Protection crew needs time to assemble, but you and me, Mikey, we... But I’ll have to place the charges Mikey, I have components to connect and it’ll take time so I need you to buy me that

time, I need you to try and do anything you can to get him out of there, and if he's still in there by the time I'm done setting the charges then I'll come in and help get him out, and Mikey, here." He digs in a panel compartment and hands Peter an earpiece.

An earpiece? Like SHIELD uses?

Why the hell did he have that just sitting in the van in the spot where most people keep like hand sanitizer and a tin of Altoids or something, what kind of person — oh never mind, it's Drew. Drew runs a house of low-key cultists and thought it'd be a really good idea — an idea worth *arguing* — to teach ostensibly-disenfranchised-and-also-underage—"Mikey" how to build respectably effective explosives with everyday components, the acquisition of which are unlikely to ping any major watch lists. The better question is why would a guy like that *not* have an Agent Smith earpiece sitting in the plain white panel van that he uses to transport said *explosives*.

Also Drew's plan is a terrible plan. Spider-Man is not the most strategic of supers and even he knows that this is a terrible plan. Oh my god is this how Steve feels about the rest of them all the time with their rushing-into-the-fray holy crap how is he not a thousand times snarkier than he already is? Oh my god it's *embarrassing*.

Peter puts in the earpiece, because it's in his hand and if it stays in his hand he'll keep fidgeting the hell out of it until it breaks and he knows they're kind of pricey.

He has no idea how long they drive. Not long. Drew cuts the headlights before stopping in what sure looks like a no-parking spot. The sidewalk outside the window is wobbling, up and down in bubbly waves, the sidewalk's become a river and gosh but that must be a thing wrong with Peter's eyes because—

"With me!" Drew says as his hand comes down on Peter's shoulder-blade kind of hard and the touch cuts through what is surely a hallucination of some kind and Peter jumpsturnsreadytopunch but checks the final rush of fist-to-face while his elbow's still high in the air.

Drew glances at Peter's cocked-back fist and nods once in clear approval. "Good, that's good Mikey, that's exactly what I wanna see, only not here, okay, not me. Save it for the bastards." Drew's squeezing through the partition into the back. "Come on, hurry. *Hurry*."

Peter bonks his head twice on the ceiling as he navigates his way around his seat. Ohhh gosh that's not good, something's gone all sideways with his powers if he's bonking his head on stationary objects like the regular schlub he used to be oh no is something neutralizing his — He reaches his hand behind him and checks to see if it will stick to the back of his seat — it does — okay so he's not completely neutered but something is definitely Incorrect here — now what —

"This'll help you," says Drew with both hands unwrapping something that's been packed into an old red milk crate. "You know item 47-B? You remember how that works?"

"47-B," Peter repeats, attention fully drawn by solid fact, rote memory retrieval, something easy something his brain can do *right* even when his chest is about to blow up. "That's the one Keith put an orange sticker on that didn't get the radius spread he was hoping for but concentrated the energy release into a smaller area and had low smoke production and would probably be good for something like breaking into a vault if that was your speed or for taking out a very select target with minimal risk of collateral damage."

"...Damn, yeah. Real good, Mikey," Drew mutters. "Also doesn't weigh very much. Easy to transport in all kinds of ways." He pulls the thing out of the crate and unfolds it. "This is a little bit of an older version, Keith never gave it a number, but it works basically the same way. If you

know 47-B then you know this piece well enough too.”

“*Oh my GOD why is it on a VEST?*” Peter says, and this time he knows he’s shouting and you know what? He is a hundred percent okay with shouting because shouting is jolly well *called for* in this circumstance.

“Transport test,” Drew says with a literal handwave. “Come over here.”

“But why is it on a VEST.”

“*Mikey! Lives are on the line here!*”

“There is *only one reason* to put a bomb on a *vest*, Drew! *Who was this for?*”

“Now is not to ask questions, Mikey!” And Drew holds it up to him. “Now is to step up and take *responsibility!*”

Peter’s brain sparks and bites down on the word. Responsibility. Fuck. *Fuck*. Reboot. He doesn’t want to reboot.

Reboot.

“Now *put the damn thing on and do the right thing!*”

Determination comes out of Peter’s ears like steam, lights him up from the inside so his fingernails are faintly glowing when he reaches out his hands. He takes what’s handed to him and will make it his own because that’s what you *do*.

The walls of the van are thundering. He puts on the vest and snaps it shut and un-velcros the detonator from the shoulder. It’s slightly too big for his hand but Peter’s always had kind of small hands and that’s a thing he owns too. The dome light glaring in his eyes has an edge so blazing sharp it could be a good weapon, but how do you grab a handleless knife without slicing your fingers off? Drew’s teeth are glowing and there’s a red spark like a cigarette cherry trailing a comet-tail from the corner of his left eye and he’s shouting a steady stream of Words at Peter and it doesn’t sound like words it’s just emotion-made-audible-made-visceral it’s passing through Peter’s bones and away like the shockwave when you stand too close to the subway platform as the train comes roaring in at full speed it’s like that, it’s like that. Metaphors are solid and it’s like that.

Now Peter’s wearing a weighted vest and he fumbles at the velcro with hands that look like they’re shaking pretty hard even though he can’t feel them shaking or doing anything else they’re just numb and his ears are a seafoam roar and he follows Drew’s guiding hands and Drew’s mimed instructions until Peter’s all strapped in tight and snug and he’s scratching at the earpiece wait why’s he need an earpiece wow this vest feels really good why hasn’t he ever had a weighted vest before gosh it’s sure nice of Drew to give him something like this even if it’s only to borrow and not to keep and

Drew is pushing him out the van and slamming the door and the sidewalk-sea continues to boil under his feet now but doesn’t swallow him up why’s he where are what’s —

“Mikey, can you hear me? Wave your right hand if you can hear me.”

Peter fumbles with the command, and does the elementary-school trick of forming two letter L’s with his thumbs and forefingers because he forgot right from left again. It takes a couple seconds. He raises the right one, straight up like he needs to ask the teacher if he can go to the bathroom and waitasecond Peter you’re a grownup now you can piss anytime you want, hell you could piss right

now, you could piss your goddamn *pants* if you wanted and no one could do anything about it.

Between the accidental suggestion and the adrenaline-anxiety thrashing up and down inside his body, his bladder tries to release, and if he hadn't just gone in the Denny's he'd be literally pissing himself right now but ohhh wait, yep, there's a little bit of a trickle, oh shit, well, okay that's a few drops, no one will notice that, it's dark out anyway, okay, okay Peter you just —

“Mikey,” says Peter's left ear.

It is a human-sounding voice and it is a voice that is used to speaking in Bob Ross tones, in calm-down-a-nervous-horse tones, but now it is a human-sounding voice speaking in an urge-a-stubborn-and-confused-horse-forward tone, a make-an-annoying-horse-jump-a-hurdle tone. Peter doesn't like it.

“Mikey,” says Peter's ear.

Far away, Peter's feet dance and shift. His feet think he's a horse about to start a race. Maybe he is a horse. Named Mikey. Not a super-spider named Peter. Being a horse seems more likely. More logical. Him, a superhero? Hah! No, he's a beast of burden with too-skinny legs and trouble following orders. He feels like he's being ridden. Driven, and steered. Christ if *only* he had a bit to gnaw on. He grinds his teeth so hard he can feel it in his tingling scalp.

Peter lowers his chin to his chest and pulls down on the front of his heavy vest with the hand that's not holding a detonator, making the vest dig into his shoulder, feeling the rein against his neck and leaning into it.

“Mikey,” says the horse's ear for another time. “The door. The *door*. Mikey, *go!*”

Peter goes.

“No, the blue one, Mikey, the blue door. Not that one. To your left. No, your other left — there you go, good boy. They're in there and you're gonna — no Mikey — no, you were right the last time, go back, you want the *blue* door—“

He can't feel his feet under him but his vision bobs as he moves and that's how he knows he's running. Both his palms hit the door and knock it open. Was it locked? Bolted or chained? How much force did it take to break open? Has he blown his identity? *Fuck* he can't tell. He can't care.

The hallway is dark. He's pretty sure it's a hallway. Might be an open room. The walls can't decide between closing in and falling away. His forearms keep swinging up to block a blow that never comes.

“There's nothing *here*,” he says.

“Straight ahead, Mikey,” says his left ear. “He's in there. He *needs help*. Go! Don't stop!”

And so what if the hostage is also management is also a bad guy is actually *The Bad Guy*? Asshole can't face proper justice if he's dead and anyway Spider-Man will be fucked sideways if he lets someone die on his watch, not tonight, not after everything he's gone through to get at this douchebag puppetmaster Tyler Durden Jonestown *prick* oh *no* he will *not* have been kept away from Wade this goddamn long for *nothing*.

He kicks open the next door before stopping to think about it and it flies right off the hinges in a cloud of splinters, the voice in his left ear yammering harsh bullshit and it's scrambling him up and pumping the gas and what the fuck is metaphor, fuck metaphor, sometimes shit just *won't make*

sense and you gotta find a way to be okay with that and Peter goes to kick another door and ends up in the splits because there is no door this time, just an empty doorframe and he grunts as the bottom of his pelvis bounces off the floor. Either just barely missed his balls or he's too numb to feel it. Much. *Oh well* it's not like he's been using his groin for anything anyway.

And this is *definitely* a big room, he can feel the way the air is different and the echoes of his movements take longer to reach him and soundwaves feel stretched out, why is this room so big it's almost gym-sized why are the lights off where the hell *are* they why aren't they *here*?

C'mon out bad guys *come ouuut, come ouut, whereeeever you aaare, and meet the young laaady who*

He jumps to the ceiling and his left ear is screaming questions demanding updates and *fuck that*, he digs a finger in and rips that voice right the hell out of his head and flicks it to the floor and tries to web it there but his web-shooters aren't on and even after he realizes this his hand keeps on flipping in that thwippy motion —

haha thwip thwip, that's fun to say, he's gonna start saying that all the time, like, out loud —

job job he has a job to do, hostage management clocks clocks clocks ticktick questions are frowned upon —

god he's warm why so warm why the burning, why with the burning and the skin and the fire-feeling on the skin it's dark no smoke-smell and he'd smell smoke-smell he's been in burning buildings before and there's no smoke-smell and no glow so the building's not on fire nothing nope there's no fire it's just in his skin, why that, why the thing —

fuck he wants to *pummel* something he wants to turn something into *pulp* god he's so fucking irritated this is such *bullshit* —

hostage bad guys find find find —

crawlcrawl, across the room on the ceiling like a good 'n' proper crawl, find another door findfindfind — you find it you keep it and he wants some fucking bad guys 'cause it's okay to pummel bad guys and *christ* he needs to get this burning thing inside his skin *out* of his skin and he's gotta pummel it out, gotta work it out —

workworkwork findfind —

BAM there goes another door — doot (beat) doot (beat) doot, another one bites the dust —

“Aaand another one's gone and another one's gone—”

What the shit is wrong with him? This is not how his brain works. This is not his brain why the runningrunning with the fire and the sweating —

oi, fuck, rank, he's sweating like a *pig* the clothes are hanging onto him cllllling GET IT OFF sensorybad *sensorybad!* and

Oh hey, he's on the floor again, look at him, Mr. Fancy, walking around like a big boy with no mask on, and

Well hello there, that door looks hefty and lockable, bad guys are probably in there, findfind

“Findfindfind—”

And here's Peter Parker coming up for the field goal, his form looks good, and here's the kick —

The door thuds open. He stops.

In an alley.

Alone.

Suburb night-noise humming softly somewhere far away, probably not as far as it sounds.

Peter tugs at his too-tight clothes that are riding up way too close to the base of this throat, strrrrrangling, and turns to look at the busted door, then around again to the alley, then around again to the door. "What?"

The cold air chews at him, turning the sweat-soaked clothes into a suit of inward-facing needles, but cooling the unhealthy fire still rioting through his molecules. His limbs feel juddery. Did he just *imagine* all that, or—?

No, he's out of breath. He just *booked it* through that entire freaking building. Very empty freaking building.

Involuntarily he yanks at his left ear, except no, he pulled out the little device that was feeding him information, and it was vague and demanding and *Drew* but it was also his *only* source of information...

Peter scowls at some trash barrels and replays the last things he heard before chucking the earpiece. *You need to take control of this situation right now* was the standout, and a lot of repeated frantic *he's in there, he's in the back* which clearly isn't true, and *here's what you say, just tell 'em* was the very last thing that tipped Peter's blood over the boiling-point and made him toss the thing.

Is it the wrong building? Aren't hostage-takers and ransom-demanders usually careful about making sure to give the right freakin' address?

Wait.

Wait no. This isn't how it works wait —

Wait why would they give *any* address except to a specified drop-point *anywhere other than* where they're holding the hostage?

He crouches, because he's dizzy and he's not *used* to being dizzy and the ground moves less if he sticks to it with all four limbs. His elbows quiver. And he squints at the gaping blackness on the other side of the open alley doorway, the blackness inside the walls. He's. Suspicious. Of... something.

A bee zips past and away. Maybe a wasp or hornet.

Needle-scratch. Peter blinks off into the empty air where it disappeared, grinding his teeth against the cold that he can suddenly feel again. How's a bee still alive in November?

Well the spiders were still alive too, so...

Not the most pressing mystery at hand, Parker.

He shakes his head and pats both his palms against his cheeks. Wake up, stupid. Pause. Take stock.

TIME FOR AN EXPERIMENT. He turns and climbs up the wall of the building on the other side of the alley, putting more distance between himself and the place Drew said was the danger zone.

Spidey-sense carries on rattling just as it has been since the back of the van.

If there were trouble where Drew said there'd be trouble, the tingles would quiet down as he moved away. But they don't. Drew was wrong.

Or he was lying.

Gosh, imagine that.

So why is Spidey-sense still carrying on all steady-like, like there's a—

Oh shit he's wearing a bomb!

He jumps and rips the vest off, frantic, like — heheh — like someone who's just noticed a huge spider sitting on their arm. He reins himself in, somehow, just before chucking the vest out into the darkness. Nooo, nono, can't do that, item 47-B is too sensitive for that and for all Spider-Man knows he could be standing on the roof of someone's home.

With very slow, deliberate, controlled movements, he folds the fabric as neatly as he can, avoiding upsetting the actual device too much. And that's when the real shakes start.

He knows these shakes. Some of it's adrenaline, but mostly it's the shakes that come with a too-fast drug comedown. It's... different. Comes from somewhere deeper. Visibly hurts. Terrifying to watch.

Worse to experience.

Two plus two equals what the *hell* did Drew put in his coffee while he was in the bathroom?

Spidey-sense sparks through his spine in both directions at once, urges him to be running. Might be a misfire, a false positive thanks to his drug-thrashed nerves, but — he runs.

Mindful of the bomb in his hands. Mindful of his unmasked face. As he goes flying over rooftops and down to the street and up to the roofs again, he doesn't do anything you wouldn't see in one of those really impressive parkour videos on Youtube.

But with a fucking bomb in his hands.

He runs out of roof and hits the street again. He remembers Adam West sprinting desperately around a harbor in a similar situation. This is much less funny. No flock of ducks. He laughs anyway, more breathless than he should be, more than a little hysterical.

The next roof he can get up to without (too much) help from his powers is an unfortunate scramble; he nearly drops the thing. Just as it occurs to him that he has no idea where he's going and that he should probably, I dunno, *defuse the fucking bomb* before he goes much farther — and just as he disobeys Spidey-sense's *very emphatic* protests and stops, drops to his knees, lays the bomb on the ground and tries to decide how he's going to handle this — he hears them:

Coming up the building, first from behind and then from all sides. Bats out of fucking *hell*, their boots heavy and, once in sight, their hands twisting around firearms and billy clubs. Pepper spray and tasers on their belts.

Spider-Man stiffens, rises off his knees but still crouched, and looks around wildly as they continue to appear from over the edge and start to fan out around him. Staring, stupidly, while they find their positions. Normal street clothes, mostly, jeans and hoodies, under black vests and night-vision goggles. Building security? No of course not. Half-cooked SWAT patrol? Cops? He can talk his way around bad encounters with cops, though it might not work the same way without the mask...

Oh, but.

No badges. No white letters saying POLICE. No radios except basic Radio-Shack Bluetooth. Not... not cops. What even *is* this...?

One rolls a cannister toward him, clacking across the roof. It starts billowing smoke from both ends as it bounces closer.

Spider-Man holds his breath before it gets here, then hoists up onto his hands and greets it with a fierce kick that sends it flying back to its handler. It smashes the man square in the face (quite by accident — super-metabolism still working on to get rid of the drugs and all, Spidey would've missed if he'd been aiming) and both cannister and man fall backward, the man's arms pinwheeling before he disappears over the edge, with Spider-Man staring in horror down the length of his outstretched arm, fingers trying over and over to click down on a web-shooter that isn't there, to extend a lifeline, to *stop it from happening* but—

Oh my god he hears the thud.

Oh god.

Oh god no.

...Then a belated scream, followed by gasping whimpers and curses.

Oh god thank you oh my god too close that was too close whoever they are that was way too close.

He pulls his arm back from that oh-so-iconic, oh-so-recognizable pose. *No mask, stupid!*

Pause. Take stock.

Except no *time* for that because some of them tilt their heads slightly at orders coming in over their Bluetooth and as a one they all settle rifle butts into their shoulders and tighten fists around nightsticks, and that is *intimidating* when it's happening all around you in a big circle and you still don't know *who they are what they want why*. And Spider-Man has to engage these yahoos without a mask and without doing anything (else) to hint at who he really is and *with a live bomb* sitting on the ground smack-dab in the middle of it all. This is his life.

Mother of fuck, he could not make this shit up.

He stands up, slowly, shaking the bone-deep shakes, breathing through his mouth. It's hard to stay upright. The roof is flat and level under his feet — he can feel it — but cants sharply sideways in his vision. Again like Adam West, like a 1960s bat-villain lair.

Surrounded by eerily thematic henchmen.

White men, all of them, every last one.

Oh.

Oh *shit*.

Spider-Man shuts his mouth, hard, and grits his teeth besides. Grits his fists. "*Drew*," he says without opening his teeth. He doesn't know how A went to B went to friggin' *sigma* or whatever the hell this is supposed to be, but one way or another he *knows* it was somehow thanks to Drew. He can work out the details later. His fists want to work out quite different details now.

When's the last time he had to fight without revealing his powers, though? High school?

He shifts his weight into a non-spidery sort of fighting stance that Cap showed him once. It feels... incorrect. He's not sure if he's doing it wrong or if it's just his muscle-memory complaining about something New And Different.

They start closing in, slowly, the black eyes of their barrels all staring at him. He pivots; the edge of his heel nudges the vest on the ground. Do they even realize what that vest is...?

Screw this.

Before they close in tight enough to be fully shoulder-to-shoulder he scoops up the bomb, darts toward a small gap between two of them before feinting to the left and slipping between a different pair of men altogether. And then he parkours the fuck *off* of that building and is *running*.

Wade's voice pops up in his brain, "dum-dada-dum"ing the William Tell Overture. Peter tries not to laugh because he needs all the breath he can get right now, but a mad cackle or two breaks through anyway. Goddammit, Wade. Even when he's not here, he's still here.

Spider-Man can hear the pursuit. It's scattered — they're not all in prime condition — some lagging, some tripping on things — good. Break them up, don't let them surround you again 'cause they won't let you slip through again. Can't fight your way out of that without being made.

Peter cuts down a side street lined with bins all set up on the curb for garbage day. He topples them into the street as he goes, their lids flapping open, scattering their heavy contents across the path behind him. A skunk nosing around for scraps hears him coming and tries to waddle out of the way; Spider-Man moves the vest to one hand and grabs the skunk by the scruff without thinking much and tosses it as gently as he can into the mess behind him. It bounces off a bag and rolls onto its feet, hissing and tail poofing skyward.

The man in the lead almost tramples it, tries to stop, trips on something and lands on his chin. Spider-Man turns the corner and judging from the enraged curses cutting through the cold air, the skunk gave him a faceful.

Jackie Chan is right — you really *can* make a weapon out of anything.

There's a used car lot across the way, metallic cellophane silver-and-blue ribbons flapping between too-bright light posts. Light is bad but cover is good. Spider-Man runs up the hood and onto the roof of an absurdly large hi-top van, jumps and snatches one end of the gaudy cellophane decoration. Then he ducks low and runs zig-zagging between the cars, leaving a shiny, fluttery trail behind him that points toward the left side of the building. When he runs out of ribbon, he darts to the right, still keeping low and out of sight.

They're not that stupid, unfortunately. He hears them fanning out and sweeping toward him in a long line.

He tries to edge around the building but there's no cover here; someone spots him, gives a shout, and they're converging again, though when Spider-Man spares a glance back he can see they're not

as agile getting through the tight-packed lot as he was. One sets off a vehicle alarm.

The rhythmic honks pursue him around to the back of the dealership. Nowhere obvious to run from here, no cover but a few trees maybe 50 yards away. He's only got a few seconds before they get eyes on him, not enough time to reach the trees.

Clasping the vest under one elbow, he spiders up the wall and rolls onto the roof of the dealership, lying on his back, cradling the bomb, trying to catch his breath as silently as he can while he stares bug-eyed up at the dirty yellow night sky and listens to boots moving around on the ground, looking for him.

The car alarm gives up and shuts up. The silence is sudden and rude.

He'd be *quite* happy to just lie here and pretend he doesn't exist until they all went away, except he's *hugging a live bomb* like a dumbass.

Also like a dumbass, he obeys the instinct to have it *not be touching him anymore* and hastily sets it down on the roof beside him.

Of course it makes a noise. Because of course it does. And of course the boots stop moving, and they're all down there listening for him so hard that his heart, naturally, decides to beat *very loudly*.

They can't hear your heart, Parker. Just stay still. Just don't move at all. Don't move, that's it that's all you have to do is *not move* —

And of *fucking course*, like the *king* dumbass, a sudden stabbing itch on his right ankle makes him move.

It's just a twitch, but he hears *he's on the roof*. He hears the whisper of sneaky shoes circling the building in search of a way up.

Shitshitshitshit

Pause. Take stock. Options?

1. Get up and keep running, without knowing where he is or where to go, while carrying a live explosive through neighborhoods where people live.
2. Detonate the bomb right here, before they climb up, there's nobody inside the building and nobody on top of it except him so it probably wouldn't be that bad.
3. Fight them off the way Spider-Man can, soundly kick their asses, get out of this whole situation *easily*, but then watch his identity go public and his superheroing career go up in flames and all the D-listers go after Aunt May, live out the rest of his life on a deserted island somewhere and make friends with a volleyball.
4. Take advantage of this short window of opportunity to see if he can defuse the bomb before they figure out how to get up onto the roof themselves.

Yep, that's the one.

He rolls over and crawls to the far edge of the roof (yeah, because that extra thirty feet of space will make *all* the difference in the outcome), sits on his feet and spreads the vest out on the ground between his knees. He can hear them muttering and swearing and making bad suggestions about how to get up here. It's only two stories tall but the walls are smooth, a lot of them glass because

that's how dealerships build showrooms, no ladder or fire escape. He's got some time. *Focus*. He opens the velcro straps holding the bomb to the fabric. It feels like ballistic fabric, military textile, he can tell from the tight smooth weave and stiffness, which is a weird choice for a suicide vest. Like, who are you trying to protect, exactly?

If the guys chasing him are smart they'll break in downstairs and find their way up to the access stairwell over there. How much longer before one of them grows a brain?

Focus.

He pulls out the phillips-head that's been living in his pocket basically since he started with construction because he got tired of waiting for Keith to pass him one, and starts opening the casing. The skin under his right eye starts twitching so hard it almost hurts.

Focus. Open the casing. Carefully. Don't jostle. Steadysteady rocksteady it's rockin' time rocksteady. Good god, too many screws. Why all the *fucking* screws.

Why all the hand-sweat loosening his grip on the plastic handle. He tries using his stickyfingers but his body's not so much into obedience right now and his non-dominant hand keeps sticking to the roof instead and that is *not* helping.

At least the light's strong enough off the car lot that he can see what he's doing, more or less.

A few hard thuds somewhere below, then a sudden sound of smashing glass and the building security alarm biting through his head BLARING SCREECHING BLARING SCREECHING BLARING

Shitfuck. "*Focus, you fuckwit!*"

Last casing screw. He lifts the edge of the panel open, slowly, squinting inside to make sure the panel's not connected to anything. It's not. He sets it aside and studies the bomb's exposed guts, the sight initiating a sudden flood of information about what it is and how it works. He stares, and waits for the knowledge to sort itself out and start making sense.

Feet thundering up stairs, getting louder fast. Feet thundering so hard and hurried he can hear it over SCREECHING BLARING. He gives the access door a sweaty glance.

No. Focus.

The door slams open and Spider-Man turns on instinct, throwing the detached access panel into the first face he sees. It doesn't do much but make the guy flinch. The next thing he throws embeds itself in the man's leg like a dagger and SCREAMING between the BLARING SCREECHING oh great, one down and a goddamn *dozen* to go and they're coming out of the stairwell one behind another behind another like a fucking magician's handkerchief and —

— and oh *shiiit*, the second thing he threw (that hopefully missed the dude's femoral artery) was his *fucking screwdriver* Peter you *unforgivable DUMBASS* how could you be so —

With a focused shove Peter slides the vest to the very edge of the roof, alongside the stairwell, where it's less likely to be stumbled over. Somersaults sideways and hears the impact of a blow intended for him land on the roof instead.

He's on his feet and spidey-sense is guiding him past a downswinging nightstick and between two more and *rifle butt between his shoulder blades* and he's not on his feet anymore. Either he closes his eyes or his brain stops processing visual input because he doesn't see what happens next but he

feels his body moving and impacts with his feet and hands and good, that's good, impacts are good if they hit his feet and hands, that means he's the one doing the hitting, right? He likes doing the hitting. He's always liked it.

Spidey-sense is a cacophany of contradictory false alarms. His body doesn't know which ones to obey.

Every time Spidey-sense does this, he ends up in pain. *Every* time. Every time in his *life*. Stupid powers.

One solve: keep moving, hope enough genuine warning-signals find their way to his reflexes, enough to see him through. There's got to be a better way than this but right now is not the time to try finding it.

Again on his feet and moving fast the wind is moving is he running? Impact with knuckles impact with elbow impact with the heel of his hand, swoopy feeling in his head that means he's dodging, impact with knuckles impact GROUND

Bad bad badbadbadbadbad getup get. Up.

On his back kicking upward, glance of sky between looming human shapes, upright again too fast too spidery, impact impact GROUND

...A different sound. Low whirr. Quiet shrill trilling overtones. Building fast for a second or two then a deep *whoom* and the unsettling feeling of blast-shock thumping through his ribs and skull.

His limbs stop their self-defensive flailing, and for more seconds than he'd care to admit he thinks, in terror, the bomb has gone off. Belatedly he curls up, covers his head.

But then he's feeling pain, distantly, and it catches his spooked-horse consciousness by a loose rein and leads him back into his body. Spider-Man has been Hurt before and this is Not That. He's been in explosions — recently — and this also is Not That. He uncurls.

First he sees a broken wall of bad guys' backs moving away from him; second, beyond and above them, the color red.

Wade's name is half-formed in his mouth before it dissipates, unspoken, because Wade can't fly, and the red man is *definitely* flying.

The whirr-whoom-shock repeats itself, and this time his eyes are open so he sees the flash of an arc repulsor. Is blinded for a moment by an arc repulsor.

(Despite all of the Everything going on around him, and despite the boneless relief and absolute confusion of seeing Tony here, he's still embarrassed enough to decide immediately that he will never tell Tony *or* Wade that he mistook one for the other.)

Too slowly, but as fast as he can manage, he rolls over and begins pushing himself up. His skinned palms are embedded with gravel. He uses both the palms and the pain to regain his feet.

“Hey! Kid! What the hell are you doing? You need to clear out, Jesus!”

Peter's barely aware of his own irritation before he hears his own hoarse voice screaming “Shut up and *do your job*, Tony!”

“Okay first of all that hurts. And second, just because I'm a household name doesn't mean you can

call me Tony like we — *excuse* you, I'm *trying* to sternly lecture this child you're assaulting. *Love* the kevlar, by the way. You sure don't look like *any* other low-budget paramilitary startup *I've* ever seen. You mind if I get a selfie?"

Spider-Man ignores him — ignores *them* — takes the chance to regain his physical equilibrium, blink the stars and spots out of his eyes. If Tony has the fighting covered, it's on Spider-Man to deal with the bomb. *Now*.

Screwdriver. He needs to go get his screwdriver back.

Once he's fully standing and his head clears from the resultant second-long blackout, he can feel his legs take him toward the stairwell, can hear Tony's voice filtering through the Iron Man faceplate, the metallic sci-fi vibrato that sounds so different from Tony's voice when he's just being a person instead of an invincible fighting robot.

Peter's limping, but he can't tell if it's foot knee hip or what, or even which leg it is. His balance is back on point, at least.

Stairwell's unguarded.

The injured man's trying to make his own way down alone. Not much faith in his fellows for an exit strategy? Or maybe he heard Iron Man's name on the comms and made an informed decision.

Either way, he's not having a great day, and Peter only has to jump the railing to head him off. Only wobbles a little bit on landing.

The man goes for his taser; Spider-Man knocks it from his hand without much effort.

For a few seconds, they just stare at each other.

"I'm sorry but I *really* need a screwdriver, like, *right now*," Spider-Man says.

They both look down at its handle, still jutting from the man's thigh. Not much blood around the puncture, though that'll change fast if...

A terrible beat passes.

And the guy reaches for the leatherman on his belt, tosses it at Peter.

"Good save," says Spider-Man. "I really didn't want that to happen either." And back up the way he came with only minimal effort to look not-so-spidery because, come on, the guy got hit in the head. There's even a little gouge in his forehead now to prove it. Who'd believe him.

Peter decides *not* to think about what he was genuinely a hundred percent willing to do that man before he produced a multitool. Not now, anyway.

"Wade will get a real *kick* out of it though," he adds out loud as he reaches the rooftop and kicks down another man whose back is to the door.

His sense of direction's screwed up, too; he looks for the vest on the wrong side of the stairwell door first, turns a full 360 in confusion, backtracks to the other side.

"*Seriously*, kid?! The hell did I *just* say?"

"Less yelling, more fighting, Tony!" Peter yells back.

“I can multitask!”

“Good for you.” Peter drops to his knees where the bomb lay, leaving himself horribly exposed and horribly close to the edge — basically the same as being in a corner, when he’s undercover. Terrible choice but too bad, options limited, can’t wait.

He keeps his back to the action because how else is he supposed to think about anything besides the fight? And his heart is trying to kick his body open like his ribcage is a locked door in a burning building but god fucking *dammit* he needs to *think* about this or they’re *all* fucked.

Suddenly he ducks and a line of wild semiautomatic shots hurt the bricks on the access stairwell over his left shoulder; chipped mortar rains across his shoulders and a ricochet sings off and thuds into the satellite dish somewhere to his right. Spidey-sense is a steady thrashing, heavy metal at full volume with no breaks for a drum solo, just a wall of prickling-stabbing tension and weird muscle spasms toppled against the wall of NOISE and Peter’s stuck in between praying that the whole thing doesn’t cave in on him.

“Trust Spidey-sense,” he says, unfolds four tools from the leatherman until he finds the phillips-head, fits it into the next screwhead.

Except it’s *hard* to trust a sense that’s not making heads or tails of the environment anymore. The building vibrates under his bruised knees with some unknown impact.

His eyes cross and go fuzzy. He squelches them shut. “Tony doesn’t know you have Spidey-sense,” he says. “He thinks you’re a civilian. He won’t let you get shot. Now — *do the thing*, Parker.”

Tony must overhear him, at least in part. “I’m not your babysitter! You couldn’t afford my fees! *Scram!*”

Peter doesn’t even turn his head — can’t look away — just keeps turning the screwhead and shouts — “Kiiiiinda busy here Tony!”

Another minute or so of *the* most stressful tedium Peter’s ever experienced — distracted for a moment by one more repulsor flash — and no more battle noise. He spares exactly one glance to be sure Tony is the one still standing, then (one danger past) tries to get swallowed up by pure Focus.

The multitool feels Wrong in his hands. Doesn’t twist the right way, balance is weird. Lefty-loosey, righty-tighty. Hand that makes the L is left-side.

Ooo-kay, now it’s time to start taking apart the more volatile bits. He reseals both sleeves up to the elbow; blows out a long breath, puffing his cheeks. His right eye is trying very hard to develop an exaggerated twitch.

The SCREECHING BLARING cuts off mid-screach. His ears track Tony’s clanging footsteps back up the stairwell. Sounds are fuzzy in the abrupt quiet and, though Tony’s footsteps still sound like they’re half a room away, Tony’s voice comes suddenly from over his shoulder and he jumps.

“*Now* do you care to explain to me just who the hell you are and what the everloving fuck you think you’re doing with that cute little accessory you got there? ‘Cause I’ve been doing this kinda thing a while, and lemme tell you, innocent civilians usually *run away* from this stuff, and right now you’re not looking too innocent. That face of yours isn’t as convincing as you think.”

Peter scrubs the heel of his hand over one ear. The ringing doesn’t subside. Nor does the agitation.

“Why don’t you ask JARVIS to fill you in,” he says, words clipped. “I mean I assume that’s how you worked your right-place-right-time magic.”

Tony’s warm voice transmutes from gold to, well, iron. “Enough with the cutesy banter. Name. *Now.*”

“More important stuff here.”

“Cops’re on the way.”

“And of course *I’m* the menace they’ll want.”

The servos in the Iron Man suit drop frequency. “Jesus chri... *Webhead?*”

Shit. Peter’s stomach goes cold. Way to make it easier to focus on the task at hand, Tony. “This is not the time for that conversation,” says Peter, after a pause.

“Jesus christ!”

“You said that already. You can shut up now.”

“What’s with the bomb? Is that part of the — are you — since when—”

“Please stop talking.”

“Get *away* from there!”

“Trying to focus.”

“Christ, Webs, would you just lemme get that thing outta here before it—”

“Too *late*, Tony, *can’t stop now.*”

“You’re not even—”

“Jesus fucking christ, Tony, woud you just shut the fuck up for a minute?!”

Miraculously, he does. Peter’s ears follow the soft whirr-clank of Iron Man’s feet starting to pace. It’s actually kind of helpful, kind of grounding.

He braces his wrist against the ground to keep from jostling the bomb as a nervous shudder works its way through his shoulders and back. Takes a deep breath through his nose and recenters.

In the movies, it’s either *always* the green wire or *never* the green wire. But in the upsetting little piece of reality sitting between Peter’s hands — which are shaking more than a little — none of the wires need to be cut. He *could*, but cutting a wire would be traumatic to the system and probably detonate the thing. It’s all down to the screwdriver and taking it apart bit by bit. Same as building it, just backwards. The screwdriver’s worked so far.

The thing is he didn’t learn the process backwards, only forwards, so after each step he has to replay the procedure from the beginning until he reaches the place he left off. And *that* involves sitting back, gesturing through the air (being *very fucking careful* not to accidentally whap the bomb with his hands, which doesn’t exactly aid his focus), and whispering mnemonic devices to himself for a while before bending over the device again.

Tony’s concern during this process is so palpable that Peter can feel it pressing against him even as

he continues to concentrate and *breathe*. He looks forward to telling Bruce how well he kept himself under control. Bruce's favorite thing is when people actually listen to him.

By and by Tony comes and leans over, watching Peter's process in silence through a closed faceplate. Peter does not overlook what the closed faceplate suggests about Tony's faith in his ability.

It'd take a real idiot to blame him for that, though.

"Take a step back," says Peter, "and a step to the left."

Again, Tony obeys. Once he's out of Peter's bubble, Peter finds the heartless blue glow of the arc reactor both comforting and helpful for his memory. It's a more pleasant version of the construction room fluorescents and it's easier to recall memories under circumstances similar to that in which they were formed, so —

Okay now if you peel back the little connector-plate here it'll reveal the negative battery terminal and then —

They both hold their breath until the connector is in Peter's upraised hand. He throws it across the roof and collapses onto his back, the dizziness escalating. His pulse swells up in his ears; his skin is far too hot.

Ahhh, yes. Safe to pass out from stress now. Safe to ride out the shakes.

"WHAT THE FUCK," he says, to himself, to the sky, to the cellophane ribbons flashing in his peripheral vision, to nobody in particular.

"I agree," says Tony. A thoughtful pause. "Are you usually this pale?"

"I think I'm starting to come down."

"From?"

"I don't know what it was but he drugged me. Some kind of stimulant, I don't know, I don't have a whole lot of frame of reference. Tony, you like substances, what does it feel like when you're on meth? Or cocaine? Or..."

"Who do I look like, Robert Downey Jr.? Ask me again when you need to cure a whiskey hangover."

Peter drapes an elbow across his sandpaper eyes. Tony's armor makes an unfamiliar series of muted sounds; an exhausted glance tells Peter it's the sound of Iron Man settling into an awkward old-man crouch by his shoulder.

"We need to get you checked out," says Tony.

Spider-Man waves him off. "Worst is over. I'll be fine. He didn't exactly take my super-metabolism into account."

Tony makes a displeased noise and is quiet for a moment. Then: "And since when can you defuse explosives? Christ, Mikey, what the hell have you been *up* to?"

Peter's entire body tightens, lifts his spine subtly off the roof in a way that, judging by Tony's reaction, invokes the uncanny valley. "That's not... where'd you hear that name?" says Peter.

Only a short pause. “Bruce.”

Ohhh, right. That at least makes sense. But Peter shakes his head and rubs the spot between his eyebrows. “Don’t call me that,” he says. “It’s not my name.”

“It’s not?”

Spider-Man gives him a Look. “Dude. No.” And he can’t say he’s surprised when he starts laughing. “I was undercover, you dingbat. I’m not a moron.”

“Thank god. In my defense, though, you really do look like a Mikey. Good choice. Bruce’ll be disappointed that he was wrong but he should be used to that kind of thing by now. He spends enough time around me.”

Peter doesn’t try to stop the laughter. Tony covers his mouth with the back of his fingers, his own shoulders shaking now. “Well that makes me the moron, I guess,” says Tony. “Also are you hungry? ‘Cause I’m hungry. Also I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Neither do I anymore.”

“Who were they? The kevlar patrol, I mean.”

“NO IDEA.”

“Well,” says Tony. “Fuck.”

“I agree,” says Peter.

Peter’s still not in the mood for full forgiveness, but. There’s a special camaraderie in sharing a long, baffled, hysterical laugh with another super-weirdo on a rooftop, in the wee hours of a Wednesday night. Or maybe a Tuesday or a Thursday or a Sunday. He stopped counting clock-ticks a while ago.

Chapter End Notes

They don’t know what’s going on, but I do.
I mean.
Sort of.

Next chapter: BAM! POW! BANG!

Your Lucky Day in Hell

Chapter Summary

In which All The Shit hits the fan at once, some answers are finally revealed, and the author doesn't know shit about keeping the chaos at a moderate level.

Chapter Notes

Yep, still alive, still updating.

Chapter warnings: Violence, and lots of it. Also some slurs.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tony stands over him, blocking out a portion of the sky with shiny red and gold.

Peter's sore back settles more calmly against the cold rooftop. He blinks up at Tony's shadow-hidden face, at the little blue computer-screen flickers tucked up in the underside of his open faceplate, outlining his less-kempt-than-usual facial hair with cold light. Peter stares blearily and thinks of nothing at all.

"So..." says Tony, to the sky.

"So," agrees Peter, also to the sky.

"I'm gonna brush right past the awkwardness of this whole..." He twirls his hand in a loose circle. "And just, uh..."

Peter claps one hand flat atop the other, both palms down, and twirls his thumbs out of sync with each other.

"Awkward Turtle, yes," Tony agrees. "That one I know."

Clint *would* make sure everyone around him knows that sign. Peter snickers. His voice is hoarse to his own ears, the snicker a trifle unhinged. His mouth feels thick and cottony. (No, not cottony. Something rougher and more painful. Like he's been gargling with a wad of fiberglass insulation fluff.)

Tony jabs a thumb over his shoulder. It looks kind of goofy with the armor on his hand. Stubby. "Why don'tcha come back to the Tower? Get yourself checked out? And maybe some sleep?"

Peter shakes his head no, rolling it back and forth against the rooftop. "I'm never sleeping again," he intones.

"Well if you ever need an insomnia buddy..."

Peter manages an eyeroll; it sets off another swirl of dizziness. "I'm good, thanks."

Tony lingers.

“You said ‘he’ dosed you? Who?”

”*Drew*,” Peter says.

“... ‘Drew’. Just ‘Drew’? Like Cher? Should I be duly embarrassed for missing a reference?”

Peter sighs and flaps Tony away. “Fill everyone in later,” he says.

Tony’s voice sobers. “You have a place to go?”

Pause.

...Nothing comes to mind, except a panda-mask and the odor of rotting industrial architecture.

There are Emotions about that. He doesn’t know what they are but they sure are happening. He can feel his face moving in some kinda way.

Tony shifts his weight.

“You okay, kid?”

Peter blinks at him. Gigglesnorts once, then keeps laughing. Laughs until he *chokes* on it.

What an *absurd* question.

“No,” Peter squeaks through the wheezing.

“I *really* think you should come back to the Tower,” Tony says in that same voice that Peter’s old teachers and guidance counselors and therapists used to use before busting out the phrase “deeply concerning”.

Peter wants none of it. “I don’t think that’s the best idea,” he says.

Tony rubs the back of his helmet and rocks from foot to foot, tongue sweeping fast across his lips. “Would a groveling apology be enough of a bribe to get you to at least *stop in*, or should I throw in some greenbacks too? Look, I’m *sorry* about before, okay? Won’t happen again. Scout’s honor. Just—“

“Trying to picture you as a Boy Scout,” Peter says, headtilting up at Tony: shiny mecha bullshit all wrapped around a face that looks squashy and sweaty and tired and *old*. The suit helps his posture but Peter knows he slouches. “Not having much success,” says Peter.

“That’s by design.”

“Everything about you is by design.”

“You have no idea how untrue that is.”

“Yes I do.”

“Then why—“

“Still mad at you.”

Tony sighs. “Fair enough,” he says. “I *guess*. But I at least get points for pulling your ass out of the

fire ten minutes ago. And which, by the way, I'd very much like an explanation of as soon as you're off the roofie juice or whatever. *And* I hope I also get points for using the S-word?"

"‘Sorry’ is not the S-word," says Peter.

"It is to me, you little shit."

"Oh I don't doubt it."

"Look, I just wanna make sure you're—"

"*Tony*. I'll be *fine*."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"Ye of little faith."

"Well, duh. I'm a man of science."

"And I'm not?"

"Look... I'm just — I'm just tryin' to look out for you here, okay. Bruce too. Guy's been nonstop herbal tea and meditation since he ran into you at the store. And despite him *kindly* agreeing to sit on his hands and let you finish up whatever the *hell* you've been doing at the Hotel California, he's been offloading all his creepy paternal frustrations on *me* instead. I'm over 50, Webhead, I don't need someone else telling me when to eat or go to bed."

"Except when you do."

"Shush now, we're talking about you. And how *you* need to talk to Chuckles and let him see you're alive and — this is the real key here — give him someone to fuss over who's Not Me."

Peter scrubs a hand over his eyes. God, poor Bruce. Another thing to fix.

"I just..." Peter pauses. "I'll come by later," he says. "Not tonight. In the next day or two. There's stuff you guys need to know anyway. Like, work-related stuff."

"Yeah, I'd really enjoy the opportunity to fill in some of the gaps between all the *weird-ass bullshit* the dragonflies managed to show me."

Peter rewinds the sentence in his head and gives it another listen. Nope, still doesn't make sense.

"Are you having trouble saying the right cranberry?"

Tony sneers a silent *ha-ha* at him, then mutters something to JARVIS. He holds up a hand and the giant wasp Peter saw in the alley earlier — damn, he forgot all about that (*gee, wonder why*) — flies directly to Tony and allows itself to be gently caught.

Peter lifts his head up off the roof for that. "Is that...?"

"I wanted to call 'em snitches — I mean, that's what the design was based on and also, hello, I mean, relevant wordplay, right?, but I didn't want to get into a copyright wrestling match with Rowling's publishers. By which I mean Pepper didn't wanna deal with the pissbaby lawyers who'd be the ones in a copyright wrestling match with Rowling's publishers, and god knows I owe her more than a few breaks." He passes the tiny beast to Peter, who turns it over in his hand, dumbfounded.

“And before you freak out again,” Tony says, “yes I’ve been having them follow you around, but not, like, indoors or anything. Not in the bathroom. They’re considerably less invasive than like 96% of what the NSA does on your average Tuesday, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

That’s not what Peter’s thinking. Mostly he’s just thinking about how *pretty* it is, shimmery but not shiny, and how smooth and warm its metal belly feels under his thumb-pad.

Tony cocks a half-grin. “How did you think I found you so fast way out here in the boonies?”

Peter shakes his head, slowly, and releases the dragonfly for it to fly back to Tony’s hand. “Hadn’t thought to wonder about details yet,” he says.

“Don’t be mad.”

“I *should* be mad,” says Peter. “But I’m not. But I might be later. No promises. Too tired right now. Forgot how to feelings.”

“As long as you make an appearance and let everyone see you’re alive and in one piece, you can hate me to your heart’s content for the rest of your life. Or, for the rest of mine. I dunno, who do you think is gonna end up dying first? You’ve got age on your side, but I have armor and access to everything ever and managed to walk away from a chest full of shrapnel, so it’s anybody’s game at this point. We should start a betting pool or something.”

“Ugh. Crass,” says Peter.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

Tony shuffles but doesn’t leave. Probably waiting for Peter to change his mind; Peter doesn’t know what he’s waiting for himself.

“Are you *sure* I can’t convince you to come back to the Tower?”

“Positive.”

“Need I remind you, I did apologize.”

“You did.”

“Well is there... like, anything *else* I could do? Right now? Somewhere else you wanna go?”

“I... I think I...” There’s no possible way to admit where he *does* want to go — who he *does* want to see — without hurting Tony’s feelings or starting a whole new argument. Then a different thought occurs to him. “Oh! Wait. Could you get something for me? I left it on a roof...”

“What am I, a courier service?” Tony says, but listens as Peter explains best he can where he left the burner and his Spider-Man suit.

Tony can’t be gone more than four minutes but Peter’s already dozing off when he comes back with the bag, shuddering and brushing imaginary spiders off himself and complaining about creepy-crawlies.

“I don’t think they can get through your armor, Tony.”

“That’s what they want you to believe.”

Peter fishes the burner out and turns it over in his hand, a sense of disappointment shooting up

through his gut so sharp it makes his eyes sting. He was *so proud* of that plan.

He tosses the phone straight up in the air. “There’s a... stuff on there,” he says.

“What kind of ‘stuff’?” Tony asks, catching it with a brief scrunch of disapproval on his face.

“‘Cause if it’s naked selfies or something, I don’t really think of you that way, like, at all, and also now that I’ve seen your babyface it feels sort of illegal.”

“No. It’s, y’know... stuff. Um... evidence. Some. Not a lot. Was gonna,” he adds, fingering the camera still hidden on his shirt. Still not dislodged even after that crazy scramble. Twist ties: who knew? “But it didn’t. Do. The thing, the plan. The...” He rolls his eyes, pretty much just at himself. “...Yeah.”

Tony plugs the phone into a thingy in his armor straightaway. “I’ll sort through it tonight. Do I at least get a hint?”

“Evidence,” Peter mumbles again, and starts to sit up. Slowly. It’s a struggle. When Tony clears his throat and reaches a hand to help him up, Peter thinks about it for a few seconds before accepting.

Then he pulls on his mask and straps on his web-shooters, the pressure and cover and familiar scent as reassuring as anything could possibly be on a goddamn unsatisfactory bitch of a night like this.

“Ah,” says Tony. “There you are.”

Peter smiles under the mask. Even the muscles in his face are worn out; he can feel the corners of his mouth quiver with the effort. *God* he must look like hell.

Tony inhales loudly through his nose. “Are you *absolutely a thousand percent positive*—“

“Yes,” says Spider-Man.

This time — maybe Tony’s guard is lower around the familiar mask than it is in front of Peter’s strange face — Tony allows himself to look a bit hurt.

“It’s just... I just need some time alone,” says Peter, half-lying. “There’s some stuff I need to straighten out,” he adds, full truth.

“Far be it from me to stop anyone from isolating themselves during a time of extreme emotional duress,” Tony says.

“I will stop by later,” Peter promises.

“You’d better, young man.” Tony looks at the kevlar patrol, scattered unconscious all around them. “And in the meantime, we’ve got these brilliant tacticians to deal with...”

“Ugh. You do it.”

“I thought this was *your* op. Hasn’t it been this whole big thing? This whole spider-boy-proves-he’s-a-spider-man *thing*?”

“Don’t wanna.”

“We can’t exactly leave ‘em in a basket on someone’s doorstep.”

“Cops don’t like me.”

“Cops don’t like anyone. They’re cops.”

“I’m tired.”

“Don’t try to foist this on me.”

“Who’s foisting? There’s no foisting. This is a foist-free situation.”

“These are *your* inept bad guys. I don’t even know who they are.”

“Neither do I.”

“Take some responsibility, bug boy.”

“You helped make this mess, Tony Stark, and you can help clean it up.”

“Well, *I* don’t wanna, either!”

“Well, you damn well owe me one.”

Tony half-turns to one side, as if dodging a poorly thrown punch. “Fine,” he says. “I’ll deal with the ‘*authorities*’. But I’m gonna whine about it the entire time and probably for a long time afterward too.”

“That’s your prerogative.”

“You just gotta get the last word, don’t you.”

If it’s meant to shut Peter up, it works.

“Can I at least get your number before you skip off into the ether again?” says Tony. “I get the feeling I’m gonna have a whole lot of followup questions and frankly I don’t trust you to show up when I want you to.”

Peter indicates the burner phone. “That’s all I got,” he says.

After much eye-rolling and wordy accusations of Peter being the world’s worst millennial for not having a psychic bond with a smartphone, Tony drops an extremely expensive-looking phone on Peter’s chest. It has no logo anywhere on it, and only 3% battery.

After much eye-rolling and wordy accusations of Tony being the world’s worst tech-genius billionaire for not being able to keep his basic devices properly charged — and for carrying a phone around when he’s inside a robot-suit capable of both hacking and blowing up Interpol — Peter shoves the phone into his pants pocket. And starts the very long process of getting up.

Tony fills the silence by initiating an argument over whether the golden-snitch-dragonfly-thing should continue to follow Peter around. Most of Peter’s energy is, at this point, focused on getting him back up onto his feet, so he relents pretty quickly. *After* making Tony swear on his mother’s grave not to check the feed unless the program detects some actual Bad Situation underway.

“Or unless you say the password,” says Tony. “That’ll cue JARVIS to interrupt me from my otherwise glamorous and stress-free life to come save you from yourself again.”

The password is *Batman sucks*.

“You’re a child,” says Peter.

Tony waves him off, and turns away to call the NYPD with his Interpol-hacking wearable robot.

Peter takes two deep breaths and swings off, but his back and shoulders scream with fatigue, so he drops to his feet and goes, slowly, on foot, in what he hopes is roughly the direction of Wade’s place.

“Should’ve asked Tony for directions,” he grumbles, then laughs at himself because if Iron Man gave directions he’d probably just *point* and consider it settled. Not even Spider-Man can travel quite as the crow flies.

He alternates between walking and swinging and thinking about getting on the train. He doesn’t have a cent on him, much less his metro card, but he knows if he asks enough people (and proves that he’s not just a cosplayer), eventually he’ll find someone eager to spot Spider-Man a ride rather than throw verbal abuse and fast-food wrappers at him. He’s done it before.

But he can’t stand the thought of wading (oh... heheh, oops) his way through all those random interactions. Right now he doesn’t think he could even open his mouth to give an address to a cabbie. So he swings, and walks, and counts down street numbers, and tries to enjoy that floaty-rubbery feeling in his lower legs, and tries to ignore the dissonant shock of pain that slams up through his feet with every step.

And tries to script what the *hell* he’s going to say to Wade.

Assuming Wade will even want to talk to him.

Assuming he can even *find* Wade.

Tony’s phone hums in his pocket. At first he thinks it’s phantom buzzing, just more of the weird tingles already coasting around his extremities.

“Luckily for you, we didn’t even need you,” Tony says before Peter can get out a *hello*. “Couple of our friends here woke up and started talking their heads off before the you-know-who’s could even finish loading ‘em up in the paddy wagon. Fuzz is already on their way to Jonestown. Bomb squad and everything. *Teeehnnically* I’m supposed to wait around here for a while and give a statement, but I’m kinda debating with myself about whether to join the party over there once that’s all said and done. Figured I’d see if you had an opinion on the matter since I’m not invested enough to have one of my own.”

Peter stops walking and strains his eyes at the middle distance, picking at the jumbled threads of Tony’s words. “They’re sending police to the Brotherhood?” he asks.

“And a bomb squad. Yes.”

“No!”

“Actually, *yes*. Didn’t I just say yes? I distinctly remember saying yes, of which ‘no’ is an antonym.”

“Yes, that’s why I’m saying no!”

“No to what? Which part?”

“All of it!”

“So you don’t want me to go over there and make sure they don’t screw up?”

“No — yes! Yes, go, but no to them.”

“...Help me out here.”

The phone beeps three low tones in Peter’s ear. He squints and shakes his head and rethinks his thoughts from the top. “No to cops with guns. No to raiding the place like a drug den!”

“Did I miss something? ‘Cause I coulda sworn this is the place that’s been pooping out suicide bombers.”

“It is! But they can’t go in there like it’s a freakin’ terrorist nest! Most of the guys in there don’t even *know* about any of that, it’s just a couple of them that do, or, I dunno, maybe even just Drew and Keith and Nicholas? But if they rush in there with, like, riot shields and—“

The phone beeps five low tones in Peter’s ear, steamrolling him for a second. Before he can start talking again, though, Tony does:

“Look, they’re already gearing up and on their way, Webs. Wheels’re already turning.”

“Wha — buh — we need to stop them!”

“Stop... the police. From raiding... a domestic bomb factory. And I know how that sounds coming from a Stark, but even back in the day we never strapped our product to live humans and released them into the wild *residential neighborhoods*.”

“But most of them don’t even *know about*—“

“I heard that the first time. What d’you want me to do then, huh?”

“Get over there when you can, Tony! Someone needs to protect them from—“

“Which ‘them’? Who needs protecting here?”

“I’ll — I’ll — Tony they can’t there’s good people in there, Tony there’s *kids*—“

The phone doesn’t beep this time, but in the corner of his vision Peter sees its light go out. He blinks at the phone. “H... hello? Tony? *Tony there’s kids in the building*. Tony? Hello? Hel— *Fuck!*” He whirls and pitches the phone against the nearest wall, not even looking to see how many pieces it shatters into before turning a hard 180 and shooting out a webline.

”Batman sucks and there’s kids in the building!” he screams as he goes, but who knows where the snitch is.

Gotta get to the House. Got to get the kids out, and Greg and Ted and all the rest who don’t know *one solitary goddamn thing* about Drew’s violent side project. Get them out before the cops show up with all their teargas and night-vision goggles and bulletproof vests and pepper spray and sidearms and assault weapons and overblown sense of sadistic entitlement.

...Or to deal with the cops themselves if it’s too late and they’re already there.

He yanks a webline too hard, wrong angle — knows immediately it’s a dislocated shoulder because it’s happened before and so many times he never thought it worthwhile to keep count — uses his other hand to wrench it back into place during the upswing-and-freefall between weblines. He sticks the next line more carefully but just as fast.

It'll hurt for weeks, but so will everything else.

Later. When there's time to feel all the pain.

Mikey's not responding. It's not too long, not too long at all, before Drew figures the twisted little retard ditched the earpiece.

"Well, shit." Drew thunks the microphone down and shuffles back up front and into the driver's seat. Settles in, pulls his phone out of his blazer.

Justin takes his sweet time answering.

"You almost sent me to voicemail, Justin," says Drew.

"It's two in the morning," says Justin.

"Not according to my watch," says Drew. "Listen, I got a loose end that slipped away from me. Need you to mobilize a few guys ASAP."

"'Slipped away', huh?" Justin's always been good at laughing without needing to do it out loud.

"He's faster *and* stronger than I thought. Little bastard's like a dropped fire hose and is too stupid to even realize it."

"And yet he was smart enough to get pretty close to tracking down your, ah, 'management'."

Drew pinches the bridge of his nose. "You're implying *what*, exactly?"

"Maybe he's not the real idiot here."

"What'd you just—"

"Stuff it, bro. Will you relax? I'll clean up your mess, *again*. But next time one of us calls one of us at ass o'clock begging for a favor, it's gonna be me, and for once in our lives you're not gonna be a little bitch about it."

"Sure, okay, I'll owe you one. Whatever. Just get it done."

"GPS?"

"Blue-fifteen. In the vest."

Justin makes a long-suffering *pff* noise. "He'll ditch the vest, dude."

"Doubt it. This one's lacking in the common sense department. Plus I slipped him so much speed he'll be seeing triple by now. I'd be surprised if he could manage to make velcro work."

"Why not just wait for him to pop a vessel, then?"

"I'm not a Bond villain. I don't leave loose ends."

"No, no, of course not. You just *create* them and then drag my ass outta bed to tie 'em up for you."

"Don't be cranky, Justin."

“‘Cranky’ is my whole schtick.”

“Tick-tock.”

“Asshole.”

Drew hangs up. Family sucks.

He starts the van and tries to remember how to put the phone on speaker while the motor warms back up.

Jeff answers in the middle of the second ring and is much more gracious about being woken up, much more. Drew makes himself sound suitably distressed and instructs Jeff to collect Mikey’s personal effects and give them to Keith, and to take Mikey’s name off the signs and schedules, and to prepare a moment-of-silence for dinner tomorrow.

Drew’s always liked Jeff, and Jeff always gets kinda broken up about it when these things happen, so Drew’s a little sorry to do it. Softens the blow best he can. Who knew poor Mikey was allergic to bees. Who knew there’d be yellowjackets out this late in the year. Nothing anyone could’ve done.

(Jeff used to be one of those “God has a plan” guys.)

Keith, bless him, picks up right away and greets Drew with only a grunt. “Jeff will be delivering Mikey’s crap in a few minutes,” says Drew. “Search them, and see that you’re thorough. Call me immediately if you find anything untoward. Be ready to have a conversation with me when I get back, no matter if you find anything or not. I’ll want to have a look through them myself, too, so keep your sticky fingers to yourself, and don’t even think about lighting the incinerator yet.”

He drums his fingernails on the back of the phone and thinks about calling Jameson, just to get out in front of tomorrow’s headlines, then thinks better of it. If the bomb doesn’t detonate — and it’s still a coin-flip as to whether it will — there’ll be no story for the media; Drew would hate himself in the morning if he subjected himself to that old goat’s endless bleating for no reason. One thing at a time, eh.

This is the longest drive Drew’s had to make in a long while, long while. He doesn’t speed, though, and sets the cruise control at five over when the temptation becomes too much. Justin’s cheap shots aside, Drew really doesn’t like turning his back to loose ends, doesn’t like it at all. But there’s a long list of other responsibilities ahead of him, and Justin’s boys have quick response time if nothing else. He drapes his free arm across the passenger headrest, tries to force himself to relax while he can.

Gosh darn if his head doesn’t feel like it’s full of bees, though.

Maybe he should start phasing out this whole ‘management’ thing. It’s something he’s been thinking about for a while — it’s been convenient, real convenient, in all kinds of nifty ways. But he’s not getting any younger, and fanning the smoke and polishing the mirrors is starting to really make his arthritis ache, along with his head. He’d convinced himself it was already too late in the game to go changing the foundational rules, but.

This whole Mikey debacle is starting to look like the nail in management’s coffin. If one stupid kid with some kinda mental disability can find his way to the dangerous questions after only a few months... and questions like *that* tend to be contagious, and who knows who *else* Mikey’s been talking to about this stuff... There’s not much Drew can do, that he can see, to keep a lid on all that

racket. Not without resorting to bread and circuses, and that's just the kind of garbage he swore off of.

But that's the real problem with trying to re-teach men how to be *men* — eventually they reach a point, you either gotta find a way to keep them subservient and complacent (*never!*), or you gotta take 'em out back and just *have it out* real old school (and lose, because you're not getting any younger). And what happens when they get strong enough to *really* overpower you, hm? How do they hold to their principles without a strong leader?

A strong *distant* leader. The kind they can't punch because he doesn't have a face.

Drew's liked playing the prophet. It's been real good for the soul, real liberating. Orders from "above", eheh. Don't shoot the "messenger". Right.

How would he even go about phasing out management? *If* he were to do it.

Sudden tragic death would be the obvious choice (after having him name Drew as his 'successor', of course), but too many people — *real* people — have been passing away lately, and there's only so much grief a community can take before it sustains the kind of emotional injury that even Drew doesn't know how to heal. The bury-and-forget method works well enough, but only when losses are occasional and relatively unimportant.

But if he has management extricate himself and slip away to some kind of greener-pastures holy land, in some kind of peaceful transfer of power, it's going to trigger the abandonment issues that fully a third of the Brothers struggle with, absolutely guaranteed, and—

Keith calls.

The vehicle's in motion so Drew puts him on speaker. "What'd you find?" says Drew, already dreading literally any answer Keith could give.

"Notebook," Keith says. "Not much to go on, but what's there isn't good."

Drew sighs away the most volatile spike of frustration before answering. "Care to give me a *hint*?"

"Landon's name, for starts."

Drew's hand darts for the phone, accidentally taps the horn along the way — the noise startles him and he swerves, overcorrects, and chokes on every swear word he knows as he gets the wobbling van back on track so it doesn't roll over.

Then he curses himself internally, because he's alone in the van and there's no reason, no reason at all, not to keep it on speaker.

"Uh. You alright?" says Keith after things get quiet again.

"Who else knows about this?" says Drew.

"Just the Good Lord above," says Keith. (This is his idea of a joke. Keith is the most stalwart, snobbiest atheist Drew's ever known.) "Kid's not what he looks like."

"Then just what in the sam hill *is* he?"

Keith hums a lazy *I dunno*. "There's also a key to a storage unit," he says.

...Sure, sure, because that's a normal thing for a homeless retarded teenager to own. "Do we know

where?”

“Pretty good idea, sure.”

“Send a couple guys over there. *Now*.” Drew grips the wheel twice as hard to stop his hands from shaking. “Not a word to anyone about this. Sit on your hands until I get there.”

Keith hangs up so Drew doesn’t have to.

Drew looks in the van’s mirrors so long he nearly blows through a stop sign. Well now he’s *extra* uncomfortable having this particular loose end at his back.

Maybe things’ll start looking a little better once he’s back at the House and surrounded by the people he *knows* are his people.

House is quiet when he gets there.

Except for the visceral familiarity of the surroundings, things don’t end up looking much better, actually.

Keith throws a beat-up spiral notebook onto the table in the construction room when Drew comes in. Something about the look of it gives a nasty little tug at the corner of Drew’s memory. Mikey was writing in a pad like this at the diner while Drew was looking him over from across the way, and shielding it with his arm. Seemed real eager to keep anyone from seeing it. Not the kind of thing Drew thought much of at the time — kids are like that, scribbling a lot of oh-so-private bullhockey in their math notes, throwing a real fit if you so much as breathe in that direction. But if you looked at it later when they were off at soccer practice, it was all just a lot of angst about girls or bitchy teachers or how much they wanna get out of this town or whatever, when it wasn’t loopy little pictures of ninjas or guns or tits.

This is a lot of scribbles, sure, but he reads through it until there’s sweat dripping down the middle of his back and staining another perfectly good shirt.

“Are you serious,” says Drew.

“Look familiar?” asks Keith, with a sarcastic little tilt to his head like he thinks this is *funny*.

“Stupid little ninny was keeping a *list*?” Drew flips the page, and one of their pamphlets falls out. It’s all decorated up, too. He glances back and forth between the pamphlet and the second page of the notebook, and once he’s got a handle on Mikey’s thought process he swears again and flips back to the first page.

“He knows,” says Keith. “He doesn’t know that he knows, but he knows.”

Drew is shaking his head, real slow. He stabs at the paper with a finger. “Oh no, no no, he *knew*. He was working on this before he even *got* here.”

Keith grunts a question.

“He had this at the diner! He had—“ Drew’s hands give up and the notebook falls to the table. “This is what he was scribbling all sneaky-like before I ever even sat down with him. He was *looking for us*.”

“He knew you’d be there?”

“He had to’ve. I’ll admit a coincidence when I see one, but this is... it’s uncanny, Keith, real spot-on.”

Keith looks at him funny. “You sample any of that chalk yourself? After you slipped him some?” he asks. “You don’t look right.”

“*No*, Jesus.”

“Just asking.”

Drew runs both hands through his hair. His palms come away freckled with dandruff. “Okay,” he says. “Okay okay okay. He’s just a kid. Right? How bad can it be.”

“How bad can it be,” Keith repeats, dubiously — and seeming eerily unconcerned, as usual.

“Jesus! Who the hell *is* he?”

“Former member?”

Drew gives him a look. “There *are* no former members.”

“Right. ‘Course not.”

“You got something you wanna tell me, Keith? You know something I don’t? You keeping something from me, Keith?”

Keith shakes his head.

“You real sure about that, Keith?”

“You burn, I burn.”

True enough. “Right, right. Let’s be logical,” says Drew. “Whoever he is, he’s young, he’s not all there in the head—“

“You real sure about *that*?”

“Come again?”

He shrugs. “Maybe he’s been faking it.”

“To throw off suspicion,” Drew says. “Shit. Yeah, maybe. Maybe maybe. *Fuck!*”

Keith clicks his tongue.

“Sorry, sorry. No need for language. ...*Okay*, well... he’s young, he’s *possibly* not all there in the head, he’s hopped up, he’s strapped into a boom-boom, *and* there’s an emergency contingent from offsite protection crew converging on him as we speak, if they haven’t already.”

“Hm.”

Drew feels his eyes cross. He shoves past Keith and starts rooting around the shelves for an aspirin. This headache is going to get real bad if he doesn’t nip it in the bud now. “What ‘hm’, Keith?” he asks, irritably.

“Have they called in yet?”

Drew's hands freeze between a cordless drill and a half-drained bottle of contraband Hennessy that he habitually ignores. "*Fuck.*"

"Such language," says Keith, and this is his idea of a joke, too.

"Where'd all this pessimism come from, Keith?"

"I've been working with him," says Keith. "The kid's smart."

"And?"

"Smarter than you. Smarter than all of us, maybe. You're used to underestimating him. Get the feeling he's used to *being* underestimated, too. Wouldn't be hard for someone that smart to figure out how to use that to his advantage."

Drew stares at him.

"If. Y'know. He had a reason to."

Pointing at the notebook as hard as he can, Drew leans in Keith's direction and tries hard, real hard, to yell. But the words won't come.

A muffled buzz rises from Keith's vicinity.

From the way Keith leans back slightly, raises both eyebrows, and looks bemusedly down toward his pocket without tilting his head, Drew thinks at first it's the vibration of a bomb preparing to detonate.

But then Keith extracts a brick-sized flip phone from his pocket and blinks at it before prying open the clamshell as if it's his first time doing so. Could very well be he forgot he had it; Drew did, that's for sure.

Keith lifts it to his ear without saying anything. Frantic shouting pours from the receiver loud enough Drew could pick out some of the words if he was trying to. Keith holds it away, a look of clear disgust on his face, and holds it out for Drew.

"This is Drew," he says, and has to say it a couple times before it really gets through on the other end and the caterwauling settles down into real words.

Drew doesn't say much as he listens to the report from the men who went to investigate Mikey's storage unit. He waits until there's a lull, then says, *very* calmly, and *very* clearly, "What exactly do you mean *fireworks*?"

"And *you* said the fireworks were a bad idea," says Wade.

[Preeetty.]

{Okay, but it's not just fireworks, is i—}

There's a bigger boom this time. Not a *lot* bigger, but just bigger enough to offset the lighthearted technicolor hilarity of the fireworks, and to let whoever-it-is know that Wade means business.

[The business boom.]

{Being awfully generous with the benefit of the doubt to sub in that “whoever-it-is” epithet when we know it’s probably Petey and he’s probably bleeding now.}

“We don’t know that,” says Wade. “We don’t know shit. That’s well established.”

[Shortbus or not, SOMEONE found the C-4 we molded into a little cupcake.]

{The addition of an actual birthday candle on top WAS a nice touch. Let’s hope they appreciated the effort that went into this.}

[Unless it wasn’t Shortbus.]

{Who cares if it was Shortbus or not? Art needs an audience to be considered truly complete. Pleb.}

[Don’tcha love how we’ve been reduced to nothing but expository bullshit? When do we get a REAL scene?]

{Prima donna.}

[I just feel like my character could have a lot more depth...]

There’s not *that* many booby traps. And like half of ‘em depend on the tripwire, and if it *was* Petey he wouldn’t stagger into a tripwire like any old jackass. Or if he did, he’d be able to get out of the way quick enough before the cupcake ignited.

[Aw, show’s ending already.]

{This is kid stuff.}

[We shoulda come up to the roof faster. We missed like half of it.]

“I was *pooping*,” says Wade.

{Excuses.}

[Didn’t hafta take so long wiping, though.]

{He does if we’re still clinging to the masochistic delusion that anyone’s gonna be doing anything to that ass anytime soon. Speaking of which... are we? Still clinging?}

Wade pulls his knees up to his chest and rocks back and forth on his roof. The damp toilet paper stuck under the heel of his bunny slipper flaps in the breeze.

“Are we even sure those are *our* fireworks?” says Wade.

{Oh, so they’re someone else’s illegal fireworks in %&#ing November? And someone else’s business-boom? Clutch a different straw, big guy.}

[No regrets!]

“Pffff. Regrets who? Never heard of her.” Besides, he’s not sure but he’s *pretty* sure you can’t technically have regrets about something you never really came down in firm favor of. Or something like that?

{Um. Just 'cause you're still felling indecisive doesn't change what you actually decided to do.}

[Fireworks for Spidey's birthday?]

{We don't know his birthday.}

[Booby traps to protect his \$#!^ 'cause someone broke in there?]

{SPIDEY broke in there. And it isn't technically a break-in if he used the key. And also it's HIS stuff in there. And also we put a Spidey on the keychain which is basically the same thing as writing his name on it which basically means it's his.}

[Buuut weren't we still not sure if that was him who took the key?]

{Who else would've come in here and taken nothing but the key?}

[Ok ok, so then... Poorly thought-out gesture of hurt feelings?]

{Getting warmer.}

"It's not him," says Wade, squinting through his scope at the last flakes of glowing ash falling, spinning slowly, and going dim. "That was all of 'em. Petey wouldn't have set 'em all off. Just the first couple and then he'd boogie outta there. They weren't set up to detonate each other. Whoever's in there tripped every trap like a clumsy sonuva booger."

[Or a Bat-villain.]

"Like I said."

{Okay, but weren't the fireworks and stuff supposed to send a message to HIM?}

[Remind me why we don't just, like, TEXT him if we wanna send him a message?]

{'Cause the big guy didn't just wanna toss a boy a text all casual-like and then be like "hey what's up, I know you swiped left on my big leprous ass and all but like, I have no idea how to move on like a healthy adult, so I saved all your worldly possessions in some kinda industrial shrine, but I feel kinda weird about it, so I need you to come clear out all your shit or I'm gonna blow it up, but like, I still can't get over you so I'm gonna blow it up all PRETTY and FANCY-like so you know I still care, but also I'm good and goddamn determined to pretend I DON'T care so I'm gonna try to catch you in the blast, too, except I actually DO care so I'm gonna work real hard to make sure it's not the kind of explosion that fucks you up for weeks afterward 'cause you've dealt with a bunch of those this year and deep down I secretly hope you do again so I can nurse you back to health again 'cause that was the only time I've actually WANTED to be alive in like foreeeever, so maybe I won't pay the most careful attention when laying my booby traps around my Spider-shrine, except I'm gonna hate myself forever if I actually do that, and oh no oh gosh now I'm all confused and dissociated and don't know WHAT kind of booby traps I just laid, sorry not sorry but actually really super sorry. :(8==D"}}

[...Yeah, that sounds like more of a thing for email than for text.]

{What he wanted to send isn't a message. It's a jumbo-sized Costco variety pack of off-brand mixed messages.}

[Sounds pretty on-brand, actually.]

*{*snrrkROFL* Ohmygod, big guy, you are SO \$%^&ed up.}*

“...It’s not him,” says Wade, lowering the scope.

[You said that already.]

{Hmm. Think we lost him.}

[God, if only.]

Wade stands up. The robe falls open and, my, it’s rather drafty this evening, isn’t it? He doesn’t bother closing it back up. There’s nobody around to impress.

“That,” he says, pointing all dramatic-like toward the no-longer-exploding fireworks like Phoenix fucking Wright, “is *not* Petey over there.”

He heel-face turns so he can crawl back in through the hole in the roof; the bunny slippers strongly disagree with this course of action, squelch out from under him. His chin hits the roof and then, a few seconds of freefall later, his ass hits the ground. Tailbone *shatters*.

[Yeowch! So much for taking care of that ass.]

“That... is definitely glass. Ah — yep, yep that’s glass.”

{Don’t pull it out!}

[Pull it out! Pull it out!]

He pulls it out. And drags himself up onto his bunny slippers while his coccyx embarks on a journey of radical self-improvement. Snap-crackle-pop.

{Great. Where’s he hauling us off to now?}

“Chateau de Tyler Durden,” says Wade. “‘Cause that wasn’t Petey, which means someone jacked his key, which means someone needs to die a horrendous death the likes of which would render Quentin Tarantino speechless and ill.”

{Close the robe first, for pity’s sake.}

“Ohhh, I’mma do one better.”

[Jolly red suit?!]

“Ho fuckin’ ho.”

{It’s too early in the year for that crap.}

“Coulda fooled me. Starbucks has been playing the Charlie Brown soundtrack since Halloween.”

[JOLLY RED SUIT. :D]

{Down, boy.}

“Up, boy,” counters Wade. “Way the fuck up someone’s cornhole.”

{Whose, exactly?}

“Eh, we’ll find out when we get there.”

Drew’s left eye is twitching. What kind of freakshow rigs up a booby trap with *fireworks*?

Terry, Mitch, and Brandon don’t have much to offer in the way of answers when they come limping back home. Just some mild-to-moderate burns, one broken arm, and a lot of extremely shattered nerves.

He’s still waiting for word back from Justin on what happened with his protection boys. There should’ve been a call by now, and the fact that there hasn’t been one can only mean bad news. Bad news makes for a real bad mood. Real, real bad.

“We’re gonna get this little psycho,” Drew says. “Along with whoever he’s working with, or for.”

“If anyone,” Keith mutters; Drew ignores him.

“We’ve worked too damn hard to build what we have here, too damn hard, and I’ll be *damned* if I stand to see it all come crashing down because of one twiggly mental patient and some sparklers. That much you can be sure of.”

“Maybe,” says Mitch, “this is the kind of thing to call in to the management?”

Drew forces out a smile and gives Mitch — the least injured of the three — the keys to the van and instructions to go to the hospital with the others.

“Hospital will call the cops,” says Keith once they’ve gone. “Fireworks’ll have been reported by now. They’ll be questioned.”

“We’ll cross that bridge later.”

“And in the meantime?”

“Maybe,” says Drew, “this is the kind of thing to call protection in for.”

“Thought you already—“

“Full protection. Full and immediate mobilization. Time to call ‘em home, I think.” It won’t take long. He and Justin keep them stationed as close to the House as they dare. Most recent drill response time for 75% mobilization was just under eight minutes or thereabouts.

“That’s on you,” says Keith, looking away and handwaving. He gets up and starts rearranging his shelves, real slow like he’s thinking about other things, real slow. Lining devices up on the table, all his tidy little boom-booms lining up there like tchotchkes on grandma’s TV shelf, all casual-like.

There’s nothing casual about it, but far be it from Drew to stop him from taking precautions.

Spider-Man knows he’s getting close when all three kinds of siren are whirling around in the air. It feels almost... normal.

For some value of the word, of course.

Twice already he had to stop and stretch out his shoulders, rub down his hands, squeeze his elbows around that spot where his forearm muscles like to bunch up and cramp. That was before he even got out of the suburbs. His body's been screaming for a break since he hit the borough limits and he has absolutely *not* provided it with that break, because that's around when he started hearing the sirens. If anything, he's been moving faster.

What'd Uncle Ben used to call it? "Horse-to-the-barn syndrome"?

Pretty sure the metaphorical barn in question wasn't metaphorically on *fire*, but okay.

Oh my god, this is it, this is the night he finally crashes headfirst into every ominous "until" he's ever uttered, he's going to actually *die*.

Probably.

Maybe.

It's not like he hasn't had these kinds of thoughts, oh, about a million times before. Or gotten up and gotten into a whole new fight immediately after declaring it Impossible, also about a million times before.

Most of those millions are located way back in his teens and early 20s, though. He's just starting to reach that point where, if he squints, he can sense age beginning to work against him rather than in his favor. His night vision lost that special edge over a year ago; every now and then he involuntarily groans when getting up out of a chair even when he's uninjured and well rested.

Not that he remembers what being well rested feels like.

If — by way of at least fourteen gallons of high-octane miracle fuel — he survives tonight, it's *got* to be the last time he pushes himself this hard for this long.

(He knows it won't be. He can't help himself. *If* he survives he'll do it all again, and again, until one time he doesn't.)

There's that "until" again, he thinks, and after taking frustrated note of how much web fluid he's already used up for transportation alone — and taking additional note to install some kind of fluid level gauge because this guesswork isn't just maddening, it's *dangerous* — he turns off the thinking. Thinking is slow, and he needs to be fast.

Good *fucking* god is he *tired*.

He sees the roof of the House, and the shiny undersides of its roof gutters lit up in red-blue flashes.

Déjà vu is such a sleepy sensation.

Two armored SWAT trucks are rocking to a stop and pooping out swarms of human-shaped riot gear.

...Because this wasn't going to be hard enough already without throwing a flippin' SWAT team into the mix. Y'know. For flavor.

Spider-Man's past them and through the window of his former bedroom before it occurs to him he maybe should've yelled out something to the cops.

He's in the hallway yelling out a "*Clear the building!*" warning before it occurs to him he maybe

should've come in a different way, for secret identity's sake.

He's already shoved a few guys toward the stairs and called a few more by name before it occurs to him he maybe isn't thinking too clearly.

Fight-noises and "POLICE" and "ON THE GROUND NOW" are trailing up the damp old staircase from the ground floor. His ears still pick out all the scatterbrained tickTICKtickticks of the clocks behind that. Doors slamming, a lot of confused shouts and a lot of "Is that really *Spider-Man*?" and "What's going on?" and Peter couldn't agree with that last question more.

There's only room in Peter's head for one thing, one goal, and he's already decided it's got to be *Drew*.

He can't even *think* the name anymore without hissing it, a single ugly syllable made long with seething.

He dodges to the left (looks downward as his feet hit the wall and sees a missed blow swing through the air beneath his knees) and is crawling across wood-panel and window. It's just chaos. Just.

Chaos.

The cops and SWAT team have uniforms but there are other guys in vests and riot masks and he doesn't know who they are. There are Brothers and them at least he recognizes, a sweep of curly hair there, a poorly thought-out beard here, a blue hat. None of them have shoes on (shoes go in the shoe rack) so he keeps his eyes low.

Boots, punch or dodge. Socks or toes, drag to an exit. Brown oxfords, attack with great prejudice, except he isn't seeing the brown oxfords.

Stripey socks in the corner, one of the kids. Spider-Man dives for him, grabs him up by the thighs, looks around for a— *Ow!* cold-cocks a guy right through his riot mask, one punch like Saitama, looks around for a door, kicks out a window instead, shoves the kid through, yes it's okay to just drop him they're on the ground level just— *Ow!* donkey-kick backwards duck as you spin aim for the knees web a beanbag gun to the ceiling break a billy club against your shin roll to the right get back up to the ceiling you don't have the *energy* to fight them *all* and they *all* wanna fight you so stay high, save your breath, look for brown oxfords, and

Bare feet no hair, knobby knees with growing still to do. Another one of the kids. Jump back down...

He cozies himself up in that dark, cold, stonewalled headspace, where the pandemonium carries on in every corner of his nervous system and all he has to do is bear it as if it weren't happening.

Brown oxfords or skinny kid-ankles. That's all. Look for those.

His mouth starts running but who knows what he's saying, because he sure doesn't. His throat and tongue are just a smokestack billowing out excess terror so his system doesn't overheat. The motors always throttle at full power.

He loses track of time. Counts only the number of kid-feet he gets out of the building. Divided by two. Makes four, makes five, makes six.

And now he's singing "The Ants Came Marching Two By Two, Hurrah, Hurrah" because why not.

The noise turns into a migraine.

He thwips a line onto Tommy's shoulder and hurls him out the window, feeds it more slack until Tommy reaches the ground and lets it go.

And that's nine.

Is that nine? It's nine. That's nine.

Oh, but is it? What if it's eight?

No. No, it's nine and all of the kids are out and Spider-Man has to content himself with that because if he starts second-guessing and triple-checking he'll be even *more* useless.

He turns and does an awkward sort of swandive over the head of an escaping Brother and back inside. The darkness and swinging flashlights and the crash of a wall clock shattering to the ground and *Drew*, he has to find Drew. Need to get management behind bars, and having Drew-in-custody is — still a longshot, but still the best shot at making that happen.

Lower the f-stop. Spin the focus knob.

He rounds the corner of the hall, goal crystallizing. Kitchen, probably. Construction room. It's where Peter'd go if he was under siege in this house. Because of the construction room, and because kitchens are full of knives and sometimes big boiling pots.

Spider-Man looks around. He's on the wrong floor. Doesn't remember climbing up. Doesn't matter.

He snags a knee on something; turns, sees a SWAT guy shoving a Brother down against the hall floor, gloved hand pressing bare face into floorboards, and it looks like Fred and Fred's nice and Fred doesn't deserve that kind of treatment so Peter kicks the SWAT guy in the hip, knocks him over.

Fred clammers to his feet and is gone down the other end of the hall before Spider-Man reaches the stairs.

Puts a foot up on the bannister and jumps it to the ground floor. Lands in the foyer between zip-tied bodies on their knees and scuffles with some cops for a second. He's coughing and his lungs hurt like when he had bronchitis and then, secondarily, he notices the sharp smell like the absolute worst gutburner Indian food that'll just eat a hole through the bottom of a dumpster.

Right, right. Pepper spray is a thing. This mask is handling it a lot better than his old ones did. His eyes don't hurt any more than they have for the last few hours already. Thank Tony later.

Breathing heavier, skirt the perimeter of the room. Crowded, over by the kitchen door. Fighting thickest there. Brothers in a semicircle around the doorway, swinging broken chair legs, stabbing kitchen knives outward at empty air, just threatening, they don't really wanna stab anyone. Pots and bowls and ceramic mugs flying out of the kitchen over their heads, bouncing off helmets crashing to the floor. Cops leaning into the Brothers with their riot shields and being pushed back and calls for tear gas and

Peter *knows* those faces defending the kitchen, as well as he knows any faces, and they're scared and they're confused and they don't know what's going on but they're rallying to protect the kitchen.

Oh, yeah. Drew's definitely in there.

He goes ceiling-ward, crawls upside-down through the top of the doorframe. Spidey-sense warns him about the skillet flying through the air but he's concentrating too hard on getting inside, takes the blow on the bony undefended point of his shoulder and *yeeowch* that's gonna be a massive bruise. At least it's not the one he dislocated earlier. Oh goodie, now both shoulders get to hurt.

Drops to the floor behind the defensive line at the doorway, only retroactively hearing "Is that Spider-Man? Is that *seriously fucking Spider-Man?*" "What the goddamn shit is going *on?!*"

Maybe it's the confusion he's inadvertently caused but the line gets pushed back into the kitchen and the cops are leaking into the room. Being immediately engaged by swarms of middle-aged fists, but that won't hold them long.

He puts his hand on the construction room door. Locked. Of course.

Presses an ear up to the door, as if any sound could escape that vault under the best of circumstances.

But nobody's trying to guard the door so that means Drew is —

Peter leans around the central workstation in time to see a lot of human backs shoving... something... something man-sized, through the swinging door to the pantry, which bumps shut before he can see what that thing is.

Like he needs to ask.

He sprints the distance — nearly wipes out on, of all things, a puddle of spilled sauce or something on the floor — and yanks the Brothers away from the pantry door, shoving-tossing them more or less over his shoulder. Goes through.

It smells like cheese and the hidden door to the basement steps is gently shutting itself the last inch or so.

He hears footsteps on concrete below when he makes for those stairs — those creepy-narrow-wooden-cobwebby and uneven and creaky and his feet doesn't know them because although he knew this door was here he never went to the basement for anything. Gets a three-inch splinter in his palm from the dry-rotted handrail, plucks it out with his fingers so it's not in the way. The footsteps are gone before he reaches the bottom of the steps and it's dark.

Spidey-sense takes him around boxes and stacks of cans and things covered in dropcloths and he can't see any of it, feels like that one person in a heist movie who has to do a sexy little dance to get through the moving-laser security system. Only much less sexy. Much more drafty and one thing he *does* see in the dark is a big pile of stale mouse droppings and a sprung rat trap with nothing in it.

Pause *no time to pause* PAUSE.

Take. Stock. "Wheere oh where has my little dog gone?"

Spidey-sense doesn't seem to think Drew's still in the basement. Which means there's a second exit. So where's — ah. Door. He's almost there when his shoe scuffs something across the floor.

One of those crappy old antique doorhandles, just this rusty lever. It's freshly broken off. He squints at the door, touches fingertips to broken knob.

“Clever girl.” Peter turns and takes the stairs back the way he came, four at a time. Goes right up to the ceiling and very resolutely Does Not Look at anything that’s happening beneath him. Across the foyer, back hall, behind the stairs, cut left — no, cut *right* because he’s upside-down — all the way until he reaches the window then second door from the end and *that* leads to the uninsulated room where they keep the emergency generator and candles and the old mop bucket and here, behind the broken vacuum, *this* goes out to the backyard.

If he can ever get all the damn locks open, if —

Oh wait, duh. Mask’s on. (Oh snap, he could’ve done this with the basement door and saved himself the trouble...) He grabs the door handle and yanks, all the bolts splintering their way through the doorframe at once. One of the hinges comes off with them.

Save some of that strength, Parker. There can’t be much left by now.

Road’s blocked off — cops saw to that — so Drew won’t be going for the van or any of the other cars, which leaves... through the back fence and between the buildings, toward the more derelict structures, then it’s the river or a jump down to the train or any number of other escapes so this needs to happen *now* —

He goes over the fence, *over* the abandoned back-neighbor building and *DREW!!* gonna come down on that motherfucker, just, like, right the hell down on top of him like a leopard out of a *tree* this could *work* —

Spider-Man’s feet hit the pavement and, for a couple seconds, his eyes are right on Drew.

For a couple seconds.

Then the *swarm* of armored men all turn and look at him at once. Stupid black kevlar. More of those guys from the roof of the car place? And Peter can’t look away from that many eyes. The barrels of their guns look like eyes, too.

And he’s built enough Brotherhood-style homebrew bombs by now to know what they look like, even when he can only see little corners of them here and there.

And maybe there’s thirty or forty of them, or maybe sixty or eighty — his vision keeps going double from fatigue and he can’t tell the difference, but the difference doesn’t matter because he’s so exhausted his body doesn’t even have the energy to shiver anymore.

His stomach doesn’t go cold; it goes nova. He can’t feel his arms at all and his legs won’t move. Spider-sense is messing with his vision, too, rattling his brain and crossing his eyes and turning everything from double to quadruple (which makes it look four times as worse) and

Time stops altogether for a moment. The noise of the House has faded with distance and his ears ring and it’s all very, very quiet.

Spidey-sense feels like electrocution.

Spider-Man is paralyzed, also like electrocution. Death sweeping up on him *now* in one blinding current.

Two boots step up beside him, from somewhere behind him, from nowhere at all. They walk calmly, like nothing’s happening and the train will just wait for them.

And now there’s a human shape beside him, shoulder vaguely to shoulder, a gun in the left hand

and the right one briefly palming Peter's shoulder blade. A scent in the air keeps Peter firmly within his own skin.

Forty or fifty or a thousand pairs of eyes stare at Peter, and at the human-shaped space beside Peter.

A little *pfft* sound jets the air near Peter's ear. Stinks of salsa and unbrushed teeth.

"You got this," says Wade. Pitched quietly, for Peter's ear only.

Then he draws a second sidearm and steps carelessly forward like he's never missed a train in his life.

Peter watches him take point, listens to his customary pre-fight blathering but doesn't register any of the words. He's just smelling the waft that Wade's body left in the air around him, the built-up kind of sweat that means Wade hasn't cleaned his suit in a while.

There is still, after all, room for one thing at a time, and one thing only, in Peter's brain.

But then shots are fired, movement's happening, Spider-Man dodges toward the flank and the One Thing becomes the fight, the need to fight. The flash of noise and red cutting through the middle of it, that's Wade but it's Deadpool it's *Fight now!* and maybe two seconds later, maybe three, Spider-Man's flipping himself over the bad guys like a border collie running across the backs of sheep, and FIGHT. NOW.

He doesn't track what happens, won't remember details later. Wade does most of the heavy lifting, and Spidey-sense does most of the rest. Second wind for sure. Third wind? Seventh? His muscles burn with overexertion, and how many adrenaline rushes can the spider-metabolism handle in one night anyway? His eyes are still streaming live content into his brain but he's not paying attention to the movie anymore.

Then he's *really* blinded, and oh yes, those are repulsor flashes, that's Tony's armor somewhere overhead and Peter can always hear that sound because it exists on its own frequency that slips right past any and all other noises. Right to the front and center, where it screams like a blue jay offended by the lack of attention.

In the auditory space created by the armor, Tony's voice works its way in: "G — oh my — my — oh my *god* I can't leave you alone for a *minute!*"

Wade throws a severed human foot up at Tony that falls far short of its mark and starts snarking back — Spider-Man, listening with idiotic fascination, takes a hit full in the back that just barely misses his kidney, and his muscles are burnt out and he's going down but before his knee hits the pavement shots are fired. Blood splashes the asphalt just as he catches himself with his hands. Blood on the back his hand. Blood on the stupid yellow sweatshirt cuff.

No killing, he thinks; isn't sure if he manages to say it out loud.

The sound of a one-man struggle and a roar of pain behind him lets him know there's no need to say it out loud anyway.

Also lets him know that he needs to get himself out of range of the shot bad guy.

Spider-Man rises to his feet. It's what he's best at.

It's a Halloween funhouse of arrhythmic strobe lighting — bad guys jumping out of every shadow

and crevice, blue-white arc repulsor flashes and brilliant burning gun flashes keeping them at bay — he fires webbing, more on the impulse to join in than in any hope of hitting the right targets. He hits some anyway.

He may be standing now but the dizziness followed him up from the ground. It gets him in a headlock. He staggers, woozy, to a knee, and recovers, rights himself. Then does it all over again.

Then, boom.

Keith is in the walls. The strut beams to his right are too warm; kitchen stove is on the other side of the wall, was in use for a while earlier tonight. House hasn't fully dispersed the heat yet.

Keith is in the walls and so are his favorite items. They're *all* his babies — he built them with his own two hands, you know? — but having lined them all up on the table earlier, it was easy to admit that he's the kind of father who plays favorites, and he left the unwanted children behind. Left them locked in the construction room, waiting patiently along a tripwire for a chance to make him proud. Left them standing guard over everything remotely incriminating that he could lay hands on and gather into the room. They'll make him proud, in the end.

The lucky chosen few items form a breadcrumb trail behind him through the walls, up and down and through and through where he's slipped through like a house rat. Most of them attached to, or settled gently beside, load-bearing members. Spaced far enough to stretch his supply of them, close enough for a single act of detonation to take them all out in a long daisy-chain of *kaboom* before the House buries them all.

Keith squeezes outside through the narrow flap that those damn raccoons keep using to try and set up shop in the basement. It's not a bright night, but after creeping through the walls, his eyes drink in the thin blue glow of the moon and the foggy yellow haze of the light pollution. He could fold himself up on the grass and pop open a book and probably read at least half a chapter by this light before it's time to begin the showstopper.

He swigs a delicate shot of his contraband whiskey instead (no way was he leaving half a bottle of Blue Label behind, not even as the world comes down around his ears). Cheers, Drew, it's been... well, not fun, and not an honor, but it sure has been some sort of thing.

Then he's trying to figure out if he's hearing a small helicopter or a very large drone, before a few flashes of light draw his eyes — for a second he panics, thinks protection nabbed his babies and is setting them off all willy-nilly in the wrong direction — then he sees the red, the deep cherry red like some jackass' midlife-crisis Camaro, and...

Yep, that's fucking Iron Man alright.

The new information doesn't quite track, doesn't make *sense*, but Keith is fine with that. Iron Man is here and he's either with them or against them, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out which.

Keith doesn't follow the news much, especially not where supermen are concerned, but it's impossible not to know who Tony Stark is, and even harder not to form an opinion of him. Keith's opinion of Tony Stark is not a flattering one.

But he can't help but sympathize with the desire to create things flashy and shiny, and if the Brotherhood is going down tonight — if *Keith* is going down tonight — he might as well go out in style.

He kisses his final baby — not his firstborn but pretty close — a very basic hand grenade he modeled on the dud vintage one his uncle brought back from Vietnam. Keith built it inside an old lightbulb. The delicate nature of it excited him at the time. The ring is the one that used to hold his mom's keys. He pulls it and hesitates only long enough to regret that he isn't the praying type, then rolls it into the basement behind him and books it for the perimeter.

Boom.

Spider-Man has enough time to think, *Again??* And then no more thoughts.

His system has had *quite ENOUGH thank you* of Boom.

The nice thing about dissociation is you can't really *feel* any accompanying panic attack. His heart could be literally melting in his chest cavity and he'd just be staring at the way light reflects off the thick rivulets of liquefied muscle tissue leaking out through his ribs.

And it's nothing so dramatic as that. Just... more Boom.

His hands stop punching but remain fists, and he's hunkered down in maybe a crouch or maybe the fetal position. The asphalt seems to squish under his feet like a firm mattress. Still feels like regular asphalt, though, when he runs the back of his clenched knuckles over it.

He doesn't know if there's *more* Boom happening or if it's just the sound of the one Boom echoing rather convincingly in his brain.

Something hits him across the back of his head and shoulder-blade. He loses his crouch and falls onto his side, still curled, still fist-clenched. His ears ring; the ringing eats up the rest of the noises trying to get his attention, folds him into an even cozier pocket of floating-fuzzy-don't-know-and-don't-care. He hums along, maybe.

Feet scuffle around him, clip him here and there. He's fine. It's fine to get kicked. He can't feel it. He's a mossy stump. Suspended unfeeling in the darkly psychedelic hollow between knotted muscles.

Later, he'll have a vague impression of Wade's hands tugging him, hard, insisting on a radical rearrangement of both Peter's body and the world at large. Grabby-grabby. Pushy-pushy. Rolling his head back, stretching his knees, lowering the ground, pushing buildings farther away. None of it makes much sense, but Peter's disinclined to argue feng shui with Deadpool. Let him do what he likes.

Then it's a bit darker, a bit quieter, and Peter is sitting on something and his ass is cold. He's staring uncomprehending at some bubbly colorshapes, then things realign a bit and he's staring — blankly, but cognizant this time — at Wade's mask. The surface of it crinkles and stretches in a way that doesn't make sense and triggers an uncanny valley that is very much No Thank You. Peter leans away, looks away.

Then the mask is off and Wade's face makes a lot more sense. It's a face. It's Wade. Wade's mouth is moving and making noise and that's Good.

Peter's vaguely aware that this is meant to trigger some kind of response behavior in himself, but damned if he knows what that's supposed to be. He sits, and stares, and frets internally. Later he'll categorize this fretting as the same feeling he used to get when he totally blanked on an exam question. Right now he just squirms and doesn't understand why.

Reality drifts along. Everything hard and sharp and bright and loud parts around him like water.

Dissociation sits a little askew in memory; remembering and pinpointing the exact moment when things started to slide downhill (mentally speaking) is easy, but remembering when exactly he regained his senses and in what order, that's different. Recovery is faster than it seems.

He's sitting in a timeless, eternal epoch, and then he sneezes once and suddenly realizes that he's been feeling rational and alert for who even knows how long.

Iron Man is standing, facing him, his knees at Peter's eye level. Saying things, but things about cops and men in custody and boring work stuff that has nothing to do with Wade.

Wade — yes, it's *Wade*, of course he knows who Wade is and what Wade *means*, how could he have forgotten — is disappearing around a corner. Trying to slip off into the shadows like a stupid ninja or something.

Peter stands up, interrupts Tony's blathering with a wordless (and probably rude) handwave, and trails after Wade.

Because time is as well defined as mashed potatoes, but despite that, he has a feeling that he's pretty sure it's Tuesday.

Tuesday means tacos. Tacos mean burritos-with-guac.

He's *finally* done with work, and nothing is more important than Tuesday.

Chapter End Notes

The plot-bits I glossed over here, especially toward the end, will be clarified later on. Peter had to prioritize and so did I.

Next chapter: Omg communication!!

I know it's been a while. That kind of thing tends to happen when you spend most of the year homeless, so I'm not going to apologize for it this time. Still not exactly back on my feet yet, but good news is the next chapter is ready to go next week-ish and the one after that is maybe a third of the way drafted.

I'm not on tumblr anymore (mostly because of the censorship bullshit, yes), but if you want to you can come stalk me or say hi on [Pillowfort](#) and/or [Dreamwidth](#).

Cancer for the Cure

Chapter Summary

In which Peter makes a long-awaited textwall, Wade makes a textwall right back with many italics, and the author doesn't know shit about pacing or structure.
(AKA: the chapter you've been waiting for so, so patiently)

Chapter Notes

This one is very short and like 90% dialogue, but I have a feeling y'all won't hold that against me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Buy me a burrito,” says Peter.

Wade doesn't turn around, but at least he stops walking. “I've bought you enough fuckin' burritos,” he says. “Also I kinda just did you a solid and now you're already askin' for another?”

“I want to talk to you,” says Peter. “And I know that means I'm supposed to be buying but I kind of... don't have any money.”

“Newsflash,” Wade says.

Peter rocks from foot to foot and yanks on his webshooter. He's the kind of anxious that makes his head feel prickly and faint and his hands numb. Or possibly that's the extreme fatigue; the world does sort of look and feel like it's being strained through cheesecloth. The one state of being can't be very good for the other, in any case.

He fills his lungs and shoves the words out with all the strength left in his diaphragm. “Okay we don't have to eat if you don't want, or I guess you can eat if you want and I won't, and I won't ask you for food again, okay, you're right, that was totally presumptuous and I'm sorry, but I still need to talk to you and since you came to help me fight I think maybe you're not *completely* upset at me and unless I'm wrong about that and you *are* then I think maybe you might want to hear what I have to say because it's going to start with ‘I'm sorry’ and just.” He inhales. “If you're okay with that then I think we should probably go to a roof or something, and I guess I just thought that, you know, us-on-a-roof usually means food and my brain just kinda made the leap that we shouldn't do one without the other, so I guess I was being stupid. So, um. Yeah. Forget the burrito but... would you come to a roof with me and let me. You know. Explain? And apologize? And... yeah. Would you? Please?”

Wade slumps, then angles his head in the direction that means he's listening to the boxes. “So the hell what?” he says. “I am *not*,” he says. “You're not allowed to be right. Fuck you and fuck the narrative,” he says. “...Shut up anyway,” he says.

He turns to Peter. “He's right, y'know. This *is* the first time you've ever actually *asked* me for

food.”

Peter thinks about that a second. “I never had to before,” he says. “You always offered first.”

“Yeah, I did, didn’t I,” Wade grumbles, mostly to himself.

“Um,” says Peter. “Roof?”

Wade slumps even harder, which puts him more or less at a 90° angle, and, sideways like that, he swivels his head and looks Peter over for a moment.

“Yeah, okay,” he says, reluctantly.

Peter doesn’t know whether to flap or cry.

“Pit stop first,” says Wade, straightening himself out and walking away.

Peter follows at what he hopes is a respectful distance. “Pit stop where?” he asks, guessing probably one of Wade’s safehouses, for clean clothes.

“JT’s Tacos,” says Wade. “Duh-doy. I can hear your stomach from over here.”

Peter trips on nothing and stops.

Wade sighs. “It’s Tuesday,” he says. ...He pauses. “Comin’?”

Peter scrambles after him and still doesn’t know whether to flap or cry.

Peter holds his partly unwrapped burrito in both hands, warming his fingers against the delicate foil and not taking any bites. His stomach’s too much of an iceberg.

Wade, for his part, hasn’t even taken his food out of the bag. It’s sitting on the roof, getting cold.

Peter is also sitting on the roof, getting cold.

Wade is standing, pretending to look at something in another direction.

“M sorry,” Peter says with a hoarse crack. Weird how it took so much effort and *force* to say, but still came out so quiet.

For a longer while, neither of them says even that much.

Peter wishes he’d been able to spend some of their time apart scripting this conversation; as bad as he’s been hurting to have it, he isn’t sure how to hammer the chaotic nebula of his perspective on recent events into a linear explanation. And Wade seems pretty intent on not getting the ball rolling the way he usually does when Peter’s mouth stalls out.

It’s not Wade’s responsibility anyway.

“Do you remember that night on the couch?” Peter says.

“You’re gonna hafta narrow that down,” says Wade. “*All* our nights were either out here or on the couch.”

“The last one,” Peter says, though he suspects Wade is being intentionally obtuse.

“Oh, you mean the one that was so great and perfect and came *this close* to being, like, capital-H Happy that you immediately ditched me without a word and joined a suicide cult?”

“I left a note,” Peter says, and immediately regrets it, because he doesn’t have the *right* to go on the defensive now.

Wade gives him a Look through the mask that seems to echo Peter’s inner chiding.

“I *remember* it,” Wade says. Darkly.

Peter lowers the burrito to his lap. He deserved that.

“There was this... you said this thing,” says Peter. “And I was all medicated and out of it so I didn’t even hear you at first. You said getting in—“ His throat tangles around something sharp all of a sudden and he has to cough for a minute. In the end his throat still feels stabby, and now on top of that his eyes are watering. “You said getting in my pants was, like, your end game.” *End game’s still the same*, his brain echoes, but somehow it feels crass to quote it verbatim.

“I did?”

...And somehow it feels even *more* crass that Wade *doesn’t even freaking remember* that part.

No. Peter shuts his scratchy eyes. Wade has memory problems. It’s not his fault. “Yeah,” says Peter. “You did.”

“...Oh. Damn. That’s... that was kinda slimy of me.”

Peter picks at his fingernails, hoping hoping *hoping* he won’t have to remind Wade what his body had been saying at the same time that his words were being slimy.

“Wait,” says Wade. “You mean to tell me *that’s* what chased you away? Petey, look, I never—”

“It was more the other stuff?” Peter says, a little high-pitched.

“Huh?”

“It wasn’t just because you spouted off some dumbass thing like that. Spouting dumbass things is your *hobby*.”

“I think of it as more of a calling, really. It’s on my resumé under ‘special skills’.”

“Yeah, see? Like that. It wasn’t that. It was. It.” Peter folds the burrito wrapper closed again, but the foil is torn, so there’s a gap there now that he can’t fix. It bothers him. He lets himself space out on it for a little while.

Wade has the good sense to allow these few minutes to pass uninterrupted.

Peter can hear the difference in his own voice when he starts using it again. Louder, and lower, and flatter. It’s his Scientist Voice. Facts facts facts.

And one fact at a time.

“The drugs wore off in the middle of the night,” he says. “I woke up but didn’t remember waking up. All of a sudden I was just... there, sitting in the middle of the bed *freaking the fuck out* and not even really knowing why? Sometimes my brain, it — pattern recognition is just — I’ll understand something, but not consciously? So I’m sitting there trying to figure out what it is I just realized,

and I'm already — my adrenaline is already, like, up here.” He taps the edge of his palm against his temple.

“And then I remember you saying that thing about the end game, and then also I remember how you got hard when I put my head in your lap, which. At the time it was happening I didn't even realize? Because of The Good Painkillers. But I guess I noticed on some other level, because how could I remember it if I hadn't noticed it to begin with. I mean. That... that did happen, right?”

Wade looks at him in unmoving silence.

Then nods.

Facts facts *facts* facts facts. “So all these details are coming back to me in messed-up waves,” Peter says. “I'm disoriented and already panicky and all these things start coming back to me. And I don't just mean stuff from earlier that night. I mean, like, stuff you've said and done over the entire length of time we've known each other. Like, flirting and stuff. That I didn't really pay attention to when they happened because everyone told me not to, and to be fair it really did seem extremely plausible that you were just messing around and didn't mean any of it, like, pretty much at all. Which I think you do on purpose, plausible deniability and all that, but that's beside the point.

“And all of a sudden I'm reframing *all* of that in the context of your... of you getting hard when I got close to you like that, and how it made you hard even though it wasn't a sexual touch, which meant that you weren't responding like that to something sexual I did, which meant you could've been having sexual responses to *any* of the nonsexual stuff I did before — or at least when you said something flirty or dirty I guess... *which* meant that everything I'd assumed wasn't real, actually... *was*. And also at the same time there's the new context of all of this stuff leading to a slimy end game. And like...”

Oh my god, he hates how suddenly crying can sneak up on you. It's like his sinuses and all the blood vessels in his face have jumped him in a dark alley.

Suffice to say he has completely lost the ability to Scientist Voice.

He tries to muscle his larynx back into shape and presses forward, trying not to go shrill, going shrill anyway. “And then I'm thinking of all these other people? Just like, from my life? These old relationships, like, friends and family and teachers, and other super-type people and. And girlfriend and. How, like. How everyone's always wanted something *outta me*, you know? A good laugh, or a patsy, or something to congratulate themselves for. A project. Whatever. And that's, like, all I'm good for. Right? This far, no farther. And whether I can give 'em what they want or not, it always hits a point where they don't. Where they. Where they're *done* with me. They either got what they wanted or they give up on ever getting it. And then it's like, they either keep pretending because they feel guilty, which makes *me* feel guilty for, like, *trapping* them somehow, or they act like they never knew me, and I dunno, maybe they didn't?”

The crying's over already. Too much of an effort for his overtaxed body. Peter drags the sleeve of the awful yellow sweatshirt across his nose. The thing's already a piece of shit anyway, and it's going in the trash the second he secures a change of clothes, so what's a little snort. He leans back on his hands and switches his gaze from his lap to the sky, brilliant with light pollution and smoggy with regular pollution.

“I guess I just...” He sighs. God, he's tired. So tired he'd laugh in defeat if he could. How is he even still sitting up. His voice gets low again, lower than before, but not so detached this time. “I thought you weren't like that. You *said* you weren't like that — but, you know. They all say that. But you really, really seemed to *get* me. I thought if that one thing was different, then that might

make *everything* different.”

He lets his hands slide outward, lowers himself onto his back (holy god, the roof is cold), leaving his feet dangling over the edge, out in space. “It’s okay though,” he says skyward. “I had enough time to — I kinda got my head clearer, sort of, in a roundabout way, and figured out that it’s more complicated than that. And I was filling in a lot of gaps with past-experience type of stuff that didn’t even have anything to do with you. The issue. The real issue was more like, my trust issues being so stuck in all-or-nothing mode that the very first shitty thing you ever did to me switched you from all, to nothing. Even though that was. Not... proportionate? Baby with the bathwater? And also, y’know. No. I don’t know. I was just. Super pissed off at myself and — *humiliated* — because I didn’t *see* any of it. Not the complexity of everything, not the really obvious fact that ever since we started hanging out you’ve been expecting to get laid at some point, not even the boner that was literally right in front of my face. So yeah, there’s that.”

The silence stretches out long enough for Peter to accidentally begin to doze, which is probably not that long at all. He is *very* tired.

Wade’s voice isn’t loud, but the sound of it bashes against Peter’s consciousness like Mjölnir.

“You’re saying... you fled screaming into the night,” he says, “because you figured I expected nookie.”

“Well, I mean, that and...”

“You have... in your *infinite* intelligence... reached the *logical* conclusion that my primary interest in you, and everything that’s ever been between you and me, hinges completely on *that*. And for *that*, you up and left. Immediately. Without. Saying. *Anything*. You of all people, Mr. Why Can’t Everyone Put As Much Effort Into Communication As I Do.”

Peter squints at Wade’s mask. For once, it looks as blank as masks are supposed to look.

Well that’s not unnerving at all.

“...Are you sad?” Peter asks.

Now the voice gets loud. “*Sad?! Are you fuckin’ shitting me?*” Wade turns and kicks the cold bag of untouched tacos clear off the roof. Peter startles, then holds himself tense and still. Wade wantonly destroying tacos: bad sign. Very bad sign.

Wade hovers over him for a second. He looks ten thousand feet tall. “...Get up.”

“What?”

“Stand the fuck up! On your feet.” He looks like he wants to grab Peter and just hoist him up, but doesn’t. “C’monnn, *up!* I need to scream for like an *hour* and I can’t do it if you’re already on the ground like a kicked puppy.”

Peter gets up, slowly and without blinking. He can feel how hard the roof is even through his soles.

Wade takes off the mask.

Very, *very* bad sign. This is real.

“Badger-licking cockwaffles, Petey, I — *fuck*, y’know, I gotta say — and I don’t *wanna* say it but I gotta — this is literally the only time ever in my entire fucking *life* I’ve ever looked at you and

thought, and I mean *really* thought, ‘Man, what a *fucking moron*.’”

Peter blinks, feels himself draw back a few inches.

“‘Cause if that’s really what you think — if you — if you *seriously* believe for *one horse-spankin’ second* that I? I of *all fuckin’ people* on this shitsmear of a planet? Could *ever* manage to delude myself into actually *expecting* sex — and I mean from fuckin’ *anyone*, babycakes — I just — I — Y’know even when the planets align and I *do* manage to get a li’l some’n-some’n, most of the time it’s just a *pityfuck* and some of the time it’s somebody just tryna *fuck with my head* and the rest of the time it’s a crab-suckin’ *hallucination*, okay?! And once or twice maybe it’s managed to not be either of those things, but fold me sideways and swear me in as president if I didn’t *waste it* because I hafta spend the whole fuckin’ time tryin’ to convince myself it *wasn’t* any of those things because I mean. Petey. Petey. I *literally don’t believe it’s happening* even when it *is*.”

“Wade...”

“And that’s just with *anyone*! And you — you, I mean... fuckin’ fuckity-fuck Petey, you’re, like, the *opposite* of ‘anyone’. You — y-you — well for one thing you’re my *best goddamn friend*, okay, there I said it are you fuckin’ *happy* now, and you’re — and you’re my absolute most favoritest person and my personal hero and yeah, okay yeah, I’ve had a crush on you since before we even *met* and once we finally did, I mean, from there it only got *better* and it turned out you’re smart and snarky and honest and a *disaster* who makes *the worst goddamn puns on earth* but also absurdly sweet and nonjudgmental to the detriment of self-preservation and — and then you’re an asshole but in a way I *like*, I mean you’re not *like* the other assholes, you’re so much *better* and then — and then you like *me*?! Like you *actually like* me? Like you wanna hang out and be sarcastic together and blather on about birds and listen to *me* blather on about what-the-fuck-ever and then — and then you’re *completely apeshit gorgeous* and you *still* wanna play Sonic and watch *Steven Universe* with me and you made the Starkbots go away and you even let me hug you and play with your hair and shit and I don’t — I just—“

“Wade?”

“So for you to sit there and *somehow* convince yourself, like, ‘Hey, this fugly manwhore is totally out to despoil me and that’s the only thing that any of this has ever *meant* to him,’ just, god fucking dammit, Pete, what the hell am I even supposed to *do* with that? I... I mean like, could *you* just brush off everything we have? (Had?) *Could* you? Everything we’ve done together, all the... all the whatever-it-even-is that we managed to *build* together? ‘Cause I’mma go out on a rickety old limb here and say that that’s a ginormous NOPE, because you were right the first time, okay, I *know* you, and you’re sweet and loyal and lonely and I *know* this stuff’s important to you, too. But like, haven’t you been paying attention? Don’t you get how huge this is to *me*? Pete. Petey. Petey. How the fuck do you *not get* what a BFD you are to me. And I *know* that’s exactly the kinda thing you have trouble pickin’ up on, right, but seriously. Petey. *I am not subtle*. And I am not even *talking* about the sex bullshit. I mean every other way in which you are basically the center of almost all the awesomeness in my crapsack universe and how you more or less *own me*. How’d you miss the flashing neon fucking lights, huh? How do you not realize that I’d personally turn Galactus’ rectum inside-out without wearing gloves just for a chance to spend more *time* with you? How do you *not get that*?”

“Wa—“

“You’re all I *got*, Petey. And you’re so, so, *so* much more than I deserve. You. You just. Just you. Just you all by your lonesome, you’re still too much. You’re too much *good*. And if you think that’s, like, *not enough* for me or whatever — if you think for one stupid... if you think that *just*

spendin' time with you is anything less than *way more* than I ever thought I could even *hope* for, much less *expect* — or that — that I could ever be, like, *dissatisfied* or whatever with just *being your fuckin' friend*... Well blow up the fuckin' moon, Pete, 'cause that's the dumbest fuckin' shit I ever *heard* and you are a *goddamn idiot*."

"..."

"...And yeah, Petey, yeah, if you really gotta know, then yeah, for the record, I *do* wanna fuck you. I want you to fuck *me*. I kinda always *have*. It's kinda maybe one of my favorite things to think about. Okay? Full disc, baby boy. I absolutely want you, y'know, *like that*. Yes Homo, a thousand and eleven percent, swipe *hard* right. But it's totally wishful thinking, and I get that, alright? I *absolutely* believe it ain't gonna happen. Ever. And I been tellin' myself for *lit-er-al-ly years* that it ain't gonna happen *ever*. And when I tell myself all that, it's, y'know, it's *really easy* to believe, so for once in my *tragically never-ending life* I do actually *believe* what I'm sayin'.

"Now let's be *real* clear here: if you ever take a blow to the brainpan and suddenly wanna tell me that I've been wrong about that, well giddyup, I'm all yours — but y'know what, you can also flip me off and tell me it's never gonna happen, just like I *always thought*, and guess what, baby boy, I'm *still* all yours. I sashayed into this epic bromance fully expecting the *opposite* of sex, okay? And I've never fuckin' looked back, not even when lookin' back would be the smart thing to do 'cause I ain't that quick, and by now I'm *pretty fucking certain* I never *will* look back. You've already given me *way more awesome* than I even know what to do with and I just. I just... I want more of *that*, alright? I can carry on my wayward son just like we were before and that's... already almost too much to wish for. It's enough. It's more than enough. *You're way more than enough*. Okay? ... You get it? Did any of that get through or do we need to take it from the top? 'Cause if you want I could yell about how you're *already the best fuckin' thing in my purgatory of a life* until I use up all the motherfuckin' oxygen in the motherfuckin' atmosphere. Do I need to do that? 'Cause I can totally do that. You *know* I can and my fuse is *so blown out* right now that I totally *would*."

He stops.

The abrupt silence is just as loud, in its own way, as Wade's voice has been for the past... however long he's been ranting. Peter's ears are ringing. (Probably from all the Boom, honestly, but it's only just starting now, so it sure *feels* like a reaction to Wade.)

Wade inhales, and he hasn't been doing much inhaling for a while now so his lungs seem to trip over themselves. He coughs, almost gags. It sounds painful. He starts to shudder, then checks it, but his hands keep shaking anyway. He rolls them into fists and hides them away behind his elbows, crossing his arms over his gasping chest.

The tougher and more put-together he tries to look, the less it works.

Peter's seen Wade in all kinds of vulnerable situations before, up to and including literally-dead-on-the-sidewalk, but this *might* be the first time Wade's ever actually *looked* vulnerable.

This is *definitely* the first time Peter's ever wanted to take his weighted blanket — about which he was always rabidly territorial — and put it across somebody else's shoulders.

The blanket's long gone, destroyed after years of abuse and too expensive to replace. The one time he had enough disposable income saved up for one, he'd spent it on a new camera instead, since he was already used to lying under his mattress by then so a new blanket seemed superfluous. Maybe that was a mistake. Maybe he should've gone for the blanket after all. He can't shove Wade under a mattress. It's not soft enough.

“...Petey? You home?”

He wonders if his own body would provide enough cover, enough weight to make Wade feel *safe*.

Because Wade needs to feel safe. Peter needs him to feel safe. Not exposed. Not hurt. Not overwhelmed. Not *vulnerable*, dear god, just calm. Calm and safe.

He *cannot be okay until Wade feels safe*. Nothing about reality is going to be okay until that happens. No other version of reality is acceptable. So how the hell does Peter make that happen. How the hell *can* he? He's too small. He doesn't weigh enough. He's not enough.

“Pete...?”

He decides to try anyway. That's what he's good at, isn't it? That's what Spider-Man is *for*. Trying anyway, even when...

“Wha... what're you doin', Petey?”

Wade's voice sounds small and confused as Peter sticks his feet to Wade's thighs and climbs up his body, then bends sideways and drapes himself across Wade's shoulders like a stole. He tries to go limp, because dead weight is heavier, but he's too upset to make any of his muscles relax. He could hug Wade super hard, but he doesn't trust his own sense of strength right now and might accidentally crush him instead, which, Wade would heal, but that'd still be completely unacceptable.

So he maneuvers himself higher until his entire body's balled up and stuck against Wade's shoulder blades. He drops his chin down on top of Wade's head and drops his arms down against Wade's chest and, gently as he can, squeezes Wade between his arms and feet because pressure, the pressure's important, and if Peter doesn't weigh enough to be a blanket then he's got to make up for it somehow because he needs for Wade to feel safe and how else is he supposed to...

“*Pete.*”

Wade's hand is on his forearm. Not grabbing or pulling, just resting there.

“What are you doing, Petey.”

He's gone all quiet again. Quiet doesn't necessarily mean calm.

“Being your blanket,” says Peter.

“I'm, uh... not cold.”

“Not that kind of blanket.” He squeezes just slightly harder, hoping that'll get the point across and the job done.

Wade's face creases down the middle. “I'm confused again.”

“The heavy kind,” says Peter. “...Weighted. Weighted blanket. Pressure stim. Makes you feel safe.” He lowers his forehead against the top of Wade's head. “I don't know how else to make you feel safe.”

“That's... real sweet, Petey, but not gonna lie, it's still mostly just making me feel confused.”

“Do you want me to come down?”

“S up to you.”

“But you’re the one I wanna make feel better.”

“Fine. Come down.”

Peter unsticks his feet from Wade’s back and lets himself down gently so he doesn’t spoil Wade’s balance.

“Now come here,” says Wade, turning around. “Unless you don’t want to.”

Peter walks into Wade’s arms more easily and more willingly than any other choice he’s made in what must be a very long time. Immediately it is both Good and Right and, holy crap, Peter made The Right Choice for once.

Wade folds himself around Peter and fills in all the spaces behind his cold back, and blocks out all the November in the air. Peter’s eyes slide half-shut and won’t reopen. When Wade pulls Peter’s face toward that generous, kind, neck-shoulder-chest cavern, Peter goes there with gratitude. His cheek makes contact with the texture of Wade’s suit, and he inhales sharply; the inhale brings with it Wade’s skin-scent, and it’s too much, it’s too real, it’s Real and it’s Good and Peter’s aching eyes can’t hold onto the tears anymore and he didn’t even know he had tears left to give he thought he’d sweated out every ounce of moisture in his body and snotted out the rest just a minute ago, but wherever they came from here they are, being tears, doing that falling thing.

The tears never touch his cheeks. They roll onto Wade’s chest and straight down in thick beads across the water-resistant material, cutting clean trails through blood and battle-dirt. Peter thinks about using his tears to write WASH ME on Wade’s suit, and laughs a little.

Wade’s arms tighten, and Peter’s arms tighten, and Peter’s body judders with voiceless sobs, and Wade’s body shakes subtly with Mystery Emotions; Peter isn’t sure what order all these things happen in, or if they’re all at once. It doesn’t matter. His arms and senses are full of Wade and, right now, that’s pretty much the only thing that’s ever mattered.

This crying jag doesn’t last too long, either, if only because of the exhaustion and dehydration. Sobs turn to sniffs and hiccups, and he notices Wade’s hand gentling his hair, Wade’s kisses landing on the top of his head, and... Wade gives *amazing* hugs when he’s not fretting about being gentle.

Peter lifts his head to tell him so, the movement prompting Wade to run both his hands in a continuous alternating cascade down Peter’s back. The different touch distracts Peter, as does the welcome sight of Wade’s stupid beautiful mouth.

He reaches up and drops light fingertips on that mouth. Wade stops moving altogether.

Peter shifts his hand aside, worried he’s making Wade nervous. Instead the hand finds itself on the back of Wade’s head, rubbing the texture by instinct. “S good,” he mumbles.

Wade grunts a question.

“Your skin. Good. Feels good. I like it. Always have.”

“Fft. Weirdo,” Wade whispers, and he’s still holding himself stiffly but doesn’t resist when Peter puts both hands on Wade’s head and pulls it lower and kisses him, quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Let's hear it for the boys.

Next chapter: Omg SMUT!! Smut and feels!

Rock Hard Times

Chapter Summary

In which the chapter title is a terrible pun, Peter succumbs to superstition, and the author doesn't know shit about writing smut but has to change the rating of this fic anyway.

Chapter warnings: mentions of past underage sex & dubcon with an age peer (non-traumatic but still Remembered); smut and feels.

See end notes for smut-specific tags.

Chapter Notes

Please note: this fic has now graduated to Explicit.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Are you goddamn fuckin’ with me?” says Wade, almost the second Peter pulls away to breathe.

He sounds... angry? Like, defensive-angry?

Not really the reaction Peter was hoping for. Not a *surprising* one, exactly, but Peter wasn't planning on kissing him — wasn't planning on anything in particular, really, except an exhausting conversation after an exhausting battle after a *previous* exhausting battle and oh dear god he needs to sleep — and suffice to say he hasn't run any call-and-response simulations in his head for this particular scenario.

Suffice to say, in other words, Peter has *no freaking idea* what to do or say next.

So he does nothing, and says nothing. It feels honest, at least.

Wade's shifting foot to foot but unwilling to back away even an inch farther, panting down into Peter's space. His patience is visibly fraying and he looks torn between trying for another kiss or trying for a left hook.

Peter doesn't think he'd mind either way, as long as it keeps Wade in his personal space.

Peter thinks maybe trying both could be fun in the right context and with a safeword, though maybe not tonight.

(Peter realizes that he's *clearly* already made up his mind about what he wants to do. His body reaches the same conclusion at the same time. All well, that's okay, it's not as if his brain was making much use of that blood supply anyway.)

Wade's about to have an aneurysm. “Are. You. Fucking with me?”

“No,” Peter says, “but I think...” He places a testing hand against the center of Wade’s chest; the man stills immediately, and the man’s heart tries very hard to break through its ribcage and throw itself into Peter’s palm. It almost succeeds.

Wade has the audacity to look surprised when Peter, instead of using the hand on Wade’s chest to push him away, slides it up to the back of Wade’s neck to pull him closer.

“...I think I’d like to be,” says Peter. “Very, very soon. Pretty much now, actually.”

Wade manages a short, distressed growl but lets himself be drawn in the rest of the way. His resolve to be all *confused and weird* starts to break down when Peter lays a measured line of kisses against the underside of his jaw, starting near the chin.

When he reaches Wade’s ear, Peter leans flush against him and whispers, “Take me somewhere, Wade.”

Whether it’s a request or a command is up for interpretation, but Wade answers with a *noise* and two iron arms tightening around Peter. For a few amazing, smelly seconds, they just hold each other, and hold each other together, both of them sighing with relief, and both with renewed intent.

Then Wade steps back just far enough to allow them to walk, one hand still on Peter’s and Absolutely Not Letting Go. “This way.”

The confusion never leaves Wade’s face. Wade’s hand never leaves Peter’s body, not really, not through the whole trip back to that gross old apartment. Factory. Squat. Whatever.

There’s a wild look about him, too, an unreadable new variation on an old (barely readable to begin with) theme. Sometimes it makes Peter want to laugh, and at other moments, to fold Wade up and hide him away in the warm little space between Peter’s belly and sweatshirt.

In the dark doorway Wade hesitates and tightens his grip on Peter’s hand. “Light’s over there,” he says, then leads Peter carefully through the shadows and clutter.

“I won’t trip,” says Peter. “Spidey-sense.”

“Baby boy, if you think I’m letting go of you for one hot second...”

“I’ll still be here when you turn back around.”

Wade grunts, unconvinced, and tightens his grip for good measure.

That stings, but it’s not unfair. Peter didn’t exactly make a good last impression here. He clamps Wade’s hand harder in reassurance, and lets himself be led. He doesn’t miss the soft sigh of relief he gets in return, though Wade tries to muffle it; Wade’s shoulders visibly relax, though his neck stays tight.

They both squint in the light. The bulb’s a cheap CFL and it buzzes and flickers. Peter’s eyes already hurt from fighting and crying and drug comedown. He shuts them, and hides them in the warm hollow of Wade’s shoulder for a few seconds. Feels a hand creeping through his hair, and his muscles melt a bit. Then they melt a bit more, out of sheer relief for being *able* to, until pain moves in where tension has left. He doesn’t care. God he missed that. That hand. On this head.

Emotions get the better of them both at the same time and they clamp their arms around each other

and squeeze the breath out of each other, and compete a little bit over who's going to lift whom slightly off the floor. Peter's very, very tired, and lets Wade win.

"I *missed* you, you stupid fuck," says Wade without putting him down. "Christ."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I only stalked you a little bit. Do you know how *hard* that was?"

"Thank you for your restraint."

"Thank you for understanding that I stalk with love and for not filing a restraining order that I would've been duty-bound to ignore anyway."

"Thank you for storing my stuff."

"Thank *you* for — oh, hey, you found out about that, huh." Wade sets him down so he can scratch the back of his own head.

Peter blinks. "... You found your way to my apartment during the narrow window of time between my last stop there and my landlady coming to clear it out, but you somehow failed to notice a key missing from your own home?"

Wade flicks his own temple in irritation (a gesture meant for the boxes, maybe) before answering. "Keys go missing, Petey, it's like what they *do*."

"Yeah but like, between the couch cushions, not off the middle of the kitchen counter."

"Oh, izzat where I left it?"

"That's where you left it." Peter's not sure where *he* left it, but doesn't say so. Not like it matters anyway.

Wade inhales sharply and squints up at the ceiling. "Wait, when were you in here? And how'd you know I wouldn't be? Gasp! Petey! Were you stalking me too?"

"As romantic as I know you think that sounds, I was kinda too busy to even have a conversation with you, much less stalk you."

"Oh."

"I actually kinda... had to... try not to think about you much. Because it's hard to stop once I start and I was kinda..."

"Busy, yeah," says Wade, spectacularly failing to hide the hurt in his voice, if he's even trying to.

"It wasn't like that and you know it," Peter says, not as gently as he probably could.

"*Do* I know it, though? I mean, what do I know, y'know?"

"Hey. Once I got my head sorted out, *I wanted to come back*. But I *couldn't*."

"More *important* things to do?"

"Wade, don't be a child. They were hurting people."

“They weren’t the only ones hurtin’.”

“I know.” Peter reaches for Wade’s hands, and is a little bit surprised when Wade surrenders them so easily. “I’m sorry.”

Wade’s body relaxes, but he grumbles nonsense under his breath, facing the floor. Pouting for attention, at this point.

A thing Peter’s more than willing to provide.

He steps in closer, draping Wade’s hands behind his own shoulders and taking him around the waist. Wade’s body is very warm through the suit. “I’m here now,” says Peter, and Wade looks at him with a curious and not-quite-soft expression, so Peter says it again: “I’m here.” His fingers play with the back of Wade’s belt while Wade looks at his face.

“Thank you,” says Wade.

And it’s such an odd thing to say, and in such an odd voice, but there is *zero* ambiguity as to everything Wade means by it. And that — the *knowing* — makes Peter want to kiss him again.

This time it lasts.

There’s no tongue, no expectations, all warmth, and...

...nothing else on the planet Earth or beyond. The only ground that exists are the two small spots Peter can feel under his feet, and those are at least four hundred miles away. His head swims like he’s going to black out. A distinct possibility, honestly. Wade’s hand slides down his back, stops at his waistline, and Peter breathes in through his nose — sharp, sudden.

Wade tries to break this kiss, ask what’s wrong; Peter chases after his mouth, catches it a little less cleanly than before, a little sideways, a little wet, who cares as long as there’s *more*.

Wade’s tongue is smooth. Is practically *silk*. The one part of him that’s not all tattered and covered in... Who’d a thunk it.

No. No, of course it would be his mouth. Of *course* it would. Stupid beautiful mouth. Stupid beautiful man, *god* Peter would drink him all down if he could and he doesn’t even know what he means by that.

Bottom’s up, maybe?

He thinks about saying it out loud, because that would get a laugh and he’d like to hear Wade laugh, but to speak means to stop kissing and right now Not Kissing Him sounds like *work*.

Almost as soon as he thinks this, though, Wade tries to take half a step to one side, immediately trips on something and goes down with one arm pinwheeling and the other losing its grip on Peter’s shoulder. Peter catches him by the front of his suit before he hits the ground and sets him back on his feet with care, hands lingering on his triceps as if to keep him from falling again, and wondering how to transition from slapstick back to kissing.

“My hero,” Wade says in his Snark Voice, but he’s flushed, if not outright blushing. Peter didn’t know Wade even *could* turn red, and yes, he internally preens a little at the accomplishment (while wondering, in the quiet back of his mind that’s *never* happy, if it makes Wade’s face hurt more).

They both make shy, anxious sounds, sort of like laughter.

“Sorry,” Wade says, abruptly. He turns aside so they’re not as face-to-face, and touches the back of his knuckle to his nose and ear a few times in quick succession, scratches the corner of his mouth.

“What for?”

“Fucking shit-sty,” Wade grumbles, hastily kicking garbage out of the way.

Peter clears his throat, but it doesn’t clear his head. “I thought you were going to get rid of this place.”

“Maybe I was keepin’ the lights on for you.”

Peter shuts his eyes. “The lights were off,” he says with a lazy grin.

“Smartass little shit.”

“Well, yeah. Someone’s got to keep up with you. I think it’s supposed to be me.” Peter walks past him. The yellow broom’s still in the closet. It doesn’t look like it’s been touched since the last time Peter saw it. He brings it back out and gets started clearing a path. Displaced house flies start swirling, landing on his arms. It should be revolting, unsanitary, but the dizzying insect buzz all around Peter’s head just gives him the ASMR tingles and helps him shiver away his nerves.

“Aw, don’t,” says Wade.

“Don’t what?”

“Just — don’t. This ain’t your mess.” He tries to take the broom; Peter holds it out of reach. They exchange glares, then play keep-away for a few seconds.

“I’m too tired for this bullshit, Petey.”

“So am I.”

Wade makes another swipe for it. “So gimme the—“

“No!”

“You shouldn’t be—“

“I want to!”

“Would you just—“

“No I would not! Why won’t you just let me—“

“No!”

“But I want to.”

“But *why*?”

“I want a clean home!”

They both stop at that.

“I mean—“ Peter twists his fists around the broom handle, taps the bristles against the floor. “You know what I mean.”

“No. I don’t.” Wade narrows his eyes suddenly. “Do *you*?”

“...Um.”

“I think you do,” says Wade. He folds his arms, leans his butt against the back of the couch (it scooches an inch or so across the floor under his weight), and settles in to wait for an answer. With both brows raised and a shit-eating grin hiding just behind his stupid beautiful frowning mouth, goddamn him.

“...looking at me like that,” Peter grumbles, deep under his breath. “You’re not making it any easier to *think*.”

“What was that? Didn’t quite catch that.”

Peter can feel his ears heating up as he taps the broom. Exhaustion is creeping up on him more and more by the second, in a more final and drastic way this time, less like the tide and more like a tidal wave; his eyes are starting to slow-blink, and here he is still in the middle of this indoor landfill, playing with cleaning equipment and blushing like an idiot. These are not ideal circumstances for thinking or getting words out.

Wade’s lost his play at nonchalance and is leaning forward a little too eagerly.

“I don’t know,” Peter says.

“You’re hedging, baby boy.”

“I’m tired.”

“Still hedging.”

“I don’t... don’t really have anywhere else? Or um, like.” Peter tongues the inside of his cheek. “Where I actually wanna be, anyway? This is...” He tilts his head at a pizza box on the floor and waves broadly toward Wade. “*You’re* here?”

“Huh,” says Wade. “Usually when I have this dream your grammar’s a lot less convoluted and your pants are a lot more not-there.”

“Oh my god, do you have any idea how long a day I’ve had.”

“Hey.” Wade crosses the space between them, and this time when he reaches for the broom Peter passes it over. Wade leans it against the wall and slides a hand over Peter’s ear and around to the back of his head. Peter can smell Wade’s chest. He feels the kiss, on his forehead this time, and realizes his eyes have fallen shut again. He forces them open; Wade looks two-dimensional in the bad light, a bold graphic scrawled on a subway wall.

“You look like a Keith Haring,” Peter says. It comes out as a mumble.

“Well, he did draw a lot of dicks. C’mon, Petey.”

Peter muscles his eyes open again when Wade takes his wrist and guides him toward the couch.

No, not the couch, but The Couch. Peter lies down without further prompting. His eyes are already closed again; he settles into place by feel and memory. He hears Wade’s feet start to move away, and scowls, and reaches one hand out blindly through the air, looking for something to hold onto. “Stay with me,” he says.

“That’s my line, you idiot.”

A moment later it seems, Peter opens his eyes to a clean floor, with the edge of a blanket — his own blanket, from his old apartment — pulled up to his nose, and slow fingers swirling little trails through his hair. He can feel fleece lounge pants under his cheek and the scents of both Wade and his own bed are all around him. It is the best possible combination of all the scents in the entire world, and *by far* his Absolute Favorite out of all the surprises that’ve sprung on him in recent memory.

He rubs the corner of his eye and wraps an arm around Wade’s thigh. The TV’s not on, and the CFL flicker is gone, replaced by a solid shaft of sunlight streaming in through a faraway window, dust motes swirling through it in no particular direction. There are no clocks to chase out the silence with their arrhythmic ticking. There are no clocks at all, and no all-caps notes stuck to the walls, and no sticky humidity from too many people breathing all at once. It’s too quiet, too calm. What is this perfection and why does it make his heart ache, why does it make his belly quiver. His bones feel loose and heavy.

“Don’t run off this time,” Wade says from somewhere above him. “Just... stay fucking put, Petey, please.” Peter can feel Wade’s voice vibrating all the way down through his taco-fed belly, which is warm against the back of Peter’s head.

He tightens the hold he has on Wade’s thigh. “I wanna be here,” he says.

Wade shifts a little and clears his throat. “I’m tryin’ here, Pete, I really am, but you’re not making it easy.”

Peter rubs the soft fabric between his fingers while his sleepy brain tries to decide what Wade means. Then Wade makes an uncertain sound and gently pries Peter’s hand off of his leg.

Ohhh, right. That.

“It’s okay,” Peter says.

Wade folds Peter’s arm and places it very deliberately under the blanket, tucked up chastely against Peter’s own chest.

“No, it’s okay this time,” Peter says, twisting to look up at Wade’s chin.

“I just,” Wade says. “Really, really, reallyreally, *really* want you to stay.”

“Mm. Same.”

“Like, for selfish reasons, not just ‘cause I think you’ll go gallivanting off with bad influences again. I’m not bein’ noble or some shit. Stay because *I* want you to. I want you to stay for *me*.”

“Same,” Peter says, again.

Wade huffs, laughter-like. “How you feelin’? You okay?”

“I’m great, actually.”

“No knocks, bumps, scrapes, bruises, breaks, concussions, contusions—“

“I mean I’m kinda beat up all over in a real general sense, but honestly? Overall? I’m great,” Peter

says.

“Did they bury any implants in you?”

“—What?”

“Encode any posthypnotic trigger words? Tiny bombs in your skull? A false tooth filled with cyanide? Memory erasure? Body swap? Clones? Replace you with an evil replicant from an alternate universe where everyone’s a nazi?”

Peter laughs.

“I’m not kidding.”

“You might as well be,” says Peter.

“Well, I’m not.” Wade looks a little put out.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.”

Wade lifts a brow.

“I promise.”

“That’s just kinda... difficult to believe,” says Wade.

“As opposed to me being a nazi clone?”

“Stranger things have happened. You know the kind of fucked-up world we live in.”

“Not *that* fucked up.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“I doubt it. Even if you were right, I mean, at this point, I seriously doubt I’d be surprised.” Peter sits up slowly, pulling the blanket taut around his shoulders. He puts his bare feet on the floor — wait, when did he take his shoes off? Did *Wade* take his shoes off? — but there’s a draft, so he pulls them back up and tucks them under his knees.

Wade’s squinting at him, like it hurts to look at him. Peter reaches over and smooths a hand across his cheek, on the side of his face that doesn’t have any open sores at the moment, until Wade’s eyes loosen and slide shut.

“I’m Peter Parker,” he says, “and I’m fine.”

Wade smirks. “Damn right you are.”

He snorts. “And this is exactly where I want to be.”

“You sure you don’t wanna go to Disneyland instead? It’s off season, we could get the park passes for cheap and find a nice AirBnB and have like fresh grapefruit for breakf—“

“No, *here*,” says Peter. “In this shithole. With *you*.”

Wade blinks, and doesn’t say anything, and looks down at his hands. He’s seemed continually surprised since they had it out on the roof, but somewhere along the way, without Peter noticing

the shift, he went from startled-defensive-surprised to just plain-jane vanilla *surprised*.

Is Peter really so unexpected?

(Don't ask that question. The answer will only make you feel like a schmuck.)

And now Wade, picking at the edges of his fingernails and avoiding eye contact and sitting here so close in a stained *Adventure Time* t-shirt, starts to incrementally curl in on himself.

Peter sits up on his haunches and puts a more generous arm around Wade's neck, and his other hand on Wade's bare forearm. The nail-picking stops and Wade starts to curl in toward Peter instead.

And suddenly Peter sees something... really soft there, like, inscrutably fragile, and it makes his chest suck tight and hot and it makes him want to hold Wade against his chest forever and ever. And before Peter understands what's happening, he's already and without warning more into the idea of *taking care of Wade* than he has ever been into any idea, ever.

When he tries to pull Wade in the rest of the way, though, imagining Wade curled up in his *lap*, Wade resists, and leans back again, looking the other way and wedging his hands under his knees.

"What?" Peter asks.

Wade hums. "You've been through a lot lately," he says, almost to himself.

Unexpectedly, Peter smiles a little. "Yeah," he says, "and here I am now."

"Back at rock bottom."

"Are you kidding? This is my triumphant victory. Save the day, get the girl."

"Sorry, but the princess is in another castle."

"Why would I want a princess when I can have a big ol' queen?" And, rubbing the back of Wade's neck with one thumb, he puts his other hand on Wade's thigh, not high enough to be pushy (he hopes), but with very clear intent.

There's that look of surprise again. This time open, and wondering. And still confused. Peter's not sure if he loves Wade's confusion or wants to grind it down to a powder so fine it'll disappear with the next light breeze.

"Yanno," says Wade, "if your memories got cloroxed, you wouldn't really have any way of knowing..."

Peter grits. "My name is Peter Parker, yes or no."

Wade blinks, makes a visible effort to breathe normally. "Your own admission and recent months of stalking-with-love both confirm yes."

"You're Wade Wilson. Yes or no."

Hesitation (confusion), then a nod.

Peter's only dimly aware of his own hand sliding down and around Wade's ribcage; mostly he notices the wavery curve of Wade's body rolling, just a little, to arch into the moving touch. It's a tense motion, doesn't seem voluntary. More like the splintered static lightning inside the big glass

ball at the science museum, chasing after idly trailed fingers, looking to ground itself, making your hair stand on end.

Big scary merc, Peter thinks, and yeah it's unspoken banter, it's mockery, but mockery doesn't come any softer than this.

Something about the softness is frightening. Maybe that's what's getting to Wade, too.

"Tell me I'm not making this up," says Peter — unaware of the words until they leave his mouth, alarmed at the broken edge to them, and unsure where this need's come from.

"You're not," says Wade, firmly. "Absolutely not. *I* might be. But if I was, I wouldn't tell me. Point of fact, I'd kill the *shit* outta anyone who'd try to convince me this wasn't as real as anything else. Anything on my plane of existence, at least. I'd spork 'em right in the liver until there was nothing left."

"Don't do that," says Peter. "You'd have to kill yourself."

"But I just said—"

"Yeah but what'd *I* just say? You still think I don't wanna be here? Why would I be here if I didn't want to be? What makes you think my wanting to be here isn't just as real as anything else?"

"Dunno. Did you *wanna* be at the Jonestown Bomb Factory all fall? When we *coulda* gone to Vermont and gotten high and watched the leaves turn and had maple-flavored everything?"

"*No*, dude. That was *work*. *Nobody* wants to be at work."

"Fair enough."

"If I'm here," says Peter, "*me*, not 'Mikey' — with *you*, then I'm okay."

Wade looks down for a minute. Then: "Who's Mikey?"

(Some stalker.) "Nobody," says Peter. "Nobody at all. There is no Mikey."

"Well, *you're* not *nobody*, I don't need to phone a friend to be able to tell you *that* with a straight face for all the money and that's my final answer, Regis."

"Then I'm okay," Peter says, and hopes it sticks this time. He looks at his hand. Yep, still there on Wade's thigh, which is still attached to the rest of Wade at a point of particular interest. Still warm. Pulse just detectable along the inside edge, under Peter's fingertips, which are trying *not* to stick. "Is *this* okay? Are *you*?"

Wade's mouth opens a few times. "If you are," he says.

Peter leans in closer. "I'm not saying it again."

When conversation fails — when thought or planning or executive goddamn function fails — you pause. You take stock. You look at the evidence in front of you, investigate all the tangibles... until you find a touchstone heavy enough to anchor reality.

Wade, conveniently, weighs about 15 stone and is *very* touchable.

"This time," says Peter, "why don't you tell *me*? I might — I think I'd really like that, if you did."

Wade tries to swallow, blows out a careful breath. “You’re — you — you’re okay. You’re okay.” He glances down at Peter’s hand on his thigh and stops breathing for just a second. “You’re here.”

Oh. Yes, Peter *does* really like it. Or maybe he just likes Wade doing as told? He really likes *something* here. His throat makes a sound to that effect. “That’s right, Wade,” he says.

“Here. With me. On the same plane of reality.”

“Mm-hm.”

“And you’re touching my thigh.”

“And is that okay with you?”

“Baby boy you can do whatever the fuck you want with me as long as you don’t leave again.”

“I’d like to kiss you again.”

“Please do. Forever. I don’t need air, air is stupid.”

Peter takes away his air. And loses his own in the process.

When he breaks off, hazy, he looks down to find his fists wound up in the fabric of Wade’s shirt. “I’d like this gone,” says Peter, tugging at the shirt.

It’s up and over Wade’s head so fast it snags on his chin and traps him. Peter, surprised only at himself for not laughing, hooks a finger under the edge of the fabric, frees Wade’s face, and stares at Wade’s mouth as he pulls the shirt off of Wade’s arms for him.

It makes a soft sound as it hits the floor behind the couch.

So much skin. It changes the color of Peter’s world.

Peter slides his hand up Wade’s arm, over his shoulder, down his chest. Wade’s texture sings up through the molecules in Peter’s palm, all the way up to his brain, calling all his wandering thoughts back home. His fingers ride their own private whims up to Wade’s collarbone, seeking out and tracing along the invisible line where neck becomes shoulder.

Wade doesn’t move, just breathes against him, breathes into him, breathes heavier. His eyes, when Peter looks, are fixated on Peter’s throat, heavy-lidded and dark, almost bleary. There’s a desperation there, too — vague, but there are too many flavors of desperation to guess — though this one, Peter imagines, is probably not one of the healthier ones.

Look at all the fucks Peter gives, though.

Think of the fucks you’re about to give, Parker. Or receive? Both? Both. Both is good.

The heat in Peter’s belly grows, sinks lower, turns to a feeling of heaviness in his crotch. He doesn’t need to look or touch to know something similar is happening in Wade. There’s a subtle shift in his odor, so subtle Peter can’t put adjectives to it, but he leans close to Wade’s neck to inhale it, distantly aware of the rest of his body inching closer to Wade too, of his blanket falling from shoulders to hips, knees shuffling slightly farther apart.

A tiny, low, hoarse sound starts in Wade’s chest, and he covers it up (poorly) by saying, “Whatcha thinkin’, Spidey-baby? You got a plan here or what?”

“Mm. Nope.”

“Youuu... sure are touching a lot.”

“That okay?”

Wade just makes a high, breathy sound.

“What’s wrong?” says Peter, pausing but not retreating.

“Just not sure, um. How you can stomach it?”

“Stomach’s not doing the thinking.”

Wade’s eyes dart to Peter’s crotch and away again. He pulls a sharp inhale and a sharper smile.

A short *pfft* escapes Peter’s lips. “You honest to god don’t see it, do you?” he asks.

“See what? Your boner? Think I could see that from space. Or d’you mean the dentist-clown in the corner with cocaine dust in his pedo-stache pointing a sounding rod at me all like, *You’re next*. I coulda sworn *he* was a hallucination.”

“Your skin, idiot,” Peter says. “How it is. Why I need to touch it.”

Wade’s face scrunches. “Error. Invalid input. Your computer will now restart.”

“Don’t blue-screen me.”

“Then please elaborate, captain.”

He tilts his head down at Wade’s body. “Shape is a function of texture,” says Peter. “Or maybe the other way around.” Then, just as matter-of-factly: “You’re perfect.”

“Oh, I’m blushing. Beware flatterers.”

“I’m not flattering you.” He reaches out his other hand and trails it down Wade’s body, not stopping at his chest this time (belly-skin gives a little jump), fingertips reading that distinct, harmonious textureshape in the finest detail. Scowling in concentration. He doesn’t want to overlook the smallest thing. Absently he says, “You’re just perfect, that’s all.”

Wade clears his throat. “Hey buster, my eyes are up here.”

Peter’s not interested in Wade’s eyes at the moment. He’s busy feeling out the jagged skin coating jagged edges of muscle, firm rounded scar tissue over the firm rounded shapes where ribs come close to the surface. Everything matches everything else. “You’re like a song where every line rhymes with every other one,” he says. He looks up suddenly, grinning. “Plus you’ve got a beat you can dance to.”

“Bow chicka bow-wow?” asks Wade.

“Better than that.”

“Top 40?”

Peter feels a force like gravity drawing his face toward the skin on Wade’s chest. “Better.”

His lips brush across Wade's sternum before pressing down in a kiss, pressing a sigh out of the lungs hidden deep inside. The sigh sounds like *acceptance*, in every sense of the word. "Good," says Peter.

"What's good?"

"You, dummy. *You're* good." He wraps his hands around Wade's throat, not squeezing but holding, just holding, and smooths his thumbs up from voicebox to jaw. Wade's head tips back readily — eyes rolling a little wild like a panicky horse and his breathing unsteady, but aside from that, careful and contained. Waiting. *Obedient*. "You're so good." Peter kisses the hidden spot under his chin. "You're being very good for me," says Peter.

Wade vibrates beneath him. His voice is tightly strung: "And you dare accuse *me* of being perfect, what the fuck. We're gonna have to have multiple conversations about preferred roles and power exchanges because not every guess is gonna be as lucky as this one but for right now I just want you to know that I am *very* down with where this is going."

"I know," says Peter.

Wade tries a half-mocking "Oho" kind of laugh, but as Peter's mouth bounces along the path his hand blazes across Wade's skin, the laugh stretches, and its edges smooth out and blur together, and it becomes a moan long before Wade shuts up.

The sound takes Peter's brain along for a ride, and when Peter comes back to himself, Wade's leaning back against the armrest and Peter's straddling his thighs, the skin on both his hands tingling from *touching* so much.

Peter's fingers tighten around Wade's waistband, and all sound stops.

"Pants are the devil," he says, tightening his knuckles, digging into Wade's hips. Peter probably *could* resist the impulse to brush his lips across that drum-tight quivering belly skin, but decides resistance isn't worth the effort.

"I thought pants were there to *hide* the devil?" says Wade — conversationally, as if Peter couldn't see his bare hand clawing into the edge of the couch cushion.

A squirming Wade is the best of all possible Wades.

"Hhah. Whatcha gonna do about it, big man?"

Peter takes a moment to appreciate the *actual* size difference between them, and snorts. "Mmkay, well first?" he says. "I don't care who's on top—"

"You don't? Izzit my birthday?" Eyebrow waggle.

"—but don't go changing up what stupid nickname you call me just because of *that*. This isn't porn and I don't wanna feel like I'm... not me, or like I'm here with a stranger or something. Don't... don't make me feel *alone* here."

Wade's quiet for a second. "I was just joking around, baby boy."

"I know. But still."

"Okay." Wade makes a *Hmm...* face. "What about if we're roleplaying?"

“That’s a different conversation. Right now we’re not.”

“You saying we could later?”

“Wade.”

The sound of his own name seems to startle him; he just looks at Peter, blinking and unguarded. There’s an abruptness to him, to his turns of resistance and acceptance, that may or may not be trustworthy.

If Peter didn’t know better, he’d say Wade is nervous. About this. Which is weird ‘cause Peter’s... not? Which is *also* weird?! And which will *make* him nervous if he lets himself start analyzing it. “If I didn’t know better,” he says instead, “I’d say you were stalling.”

“Maybe I am,” says Wade. “So many men these days rush through the foreplay, the selfish cads. I’m just tryin’ to make the romance last.”

Peter snrks and touches his forehead to Wade’s stomach. “You’ve got a funny idea of ‘romance’,” he says.

“You love my funny ideas.”

“Yeah,” says Peter. “I do.”

Wade goes quiet again.

Peter clears his throat as softly as he can. “Secondly,” he says, giving Wade’s hips another hard squeeze, “I would *also* love nothing more than to see you without your pants ‘cause part of me doesn’t believe your thighs are real and I need to investigate in the name of science.”

The entire couch shakes with Wade’s laughter. “You and your weird wordsy thoughts! Someone reads too many comic books. Or like. *Scientific American* back-issues. Jane Austen novels. Or fanfic? Chick tracts? Too much reading. Wordsing dumb.”

Peter strokes Wade’s throat with fingertips until the babbling calms. It doesn’t take long. This time it doesn’t turn into a moan, but a genuine, contented hum that tickles his nailbeds.

“You love my weird wordsy thoughts,” says Peter.

“Yeah. I do.”

Peter takes a very small moment to savor the matter-of-factness in Wade’s voice. Then: “I want your permission,” he says.

“Hm? For what? Doesn’t matter. Whatever you want. Anything you want. I hereby grant you permission to do everything ever, forever and in perpetuity.”

Peter knows better than to mistake that for exaggeration. Wade would let Peter behead him with a wooden spoon if that was what it took.

And *god* if that doesn’t take a quick detour through his aching heart on its way to his cock, leaving his brain spinning and lost. Not the beheading stuff. The willingness. The... would it be fair to call *this* desperation? Seems too dismissive. *This* is... muchmuch more.

Peter’s hips grind down, one long, thirstydelicious drag against Wade’s lap. They both grunt enjoyment.

“That’s lovely, Wade,” he says, “just absolutely gorgeous. But what I *want* is for you to *tell me* that it’s okay for me to take your pants off.”

“Baby boy, you can shred ‘em with a razor blade and set ‘em on fire if it makes you happy. You can run ‘em up a flagpole, or make me watch you jerk off into ‘em, or braid ‘em into a bullwhip and beat me with it. You can—“

“Okay okay! Wow. Okay. Wow. I get it. You have ideas, I get it. Ideas with... very clear and specific *imagery* attached. Good, *good* imagery, wow. Okay. That’s... yeah.” He blows out a steadying breath. “Now please, I’m trying to brain. I need you to settle down.”

“I thought we were doing the opposite of that?”

Peter snrks and splays a hand in the middle of Wade’s chest and pushes him deeper into the couch cushions. Deeper than he’d be able to push him without powers. The couch doesn’t appreciate it, makes a cracking sound somewhere deep inside. A lungful of air slips out through Wade’s mouth unaccompanied by words, and his eyes and whole face soften in... wonder, or something like wonder.

Incredible.

Just... just unbelievable that *this* — this is *Wade*. *His* Wade. “That’s better,” mutters Peter, and a weirdly shy smile he’s never seen before appears on the man beneath him, then vanishes fast.

It’s not a revelation that Wade likes being overpowered; it’s a revelation that he’s bashful about it in practice. That there’s something *sweet* to it.

The core of Peter’s chest pulls even tighter and starts to tingle. His cock twitches.

“We can sort through your good ideas later,” says Peter. “Every last one of them. Slowly, and at length. We can *storyboard* them if you want. Right now, though, we’re going to do what *I* want. Understand?”

“Sir yes sir.”

“Good boy. I’m—” He pauses. Did he just call Wade *boy*? Alright, this is clearly going in A Direction and no, brain, now is *not* the time to pause/take stock. Now is. Now is Wade. Now is Be Here For Wade.

“I’m g... *fuck* I’ve been waiting... I’m done with work and I’m here now and I’m gonna take care of you, Wade. Understand?” He runs his hands up and down Wade’s body, watching his textured face soften so much he starts to look almost sad. “You... *fuck*, you’ve done so much for me I can’t even wrap my head around it, you’re the most amazing... *god* you’re just the absolute *best*, aren’t you.”

When Wade smiles — and can’t chase it away so fast this time — the sweetness calls for Peter’s hand to rest on the side of Wade’s face, thumbtip tracing back and forth along the bottom edge of his lip, resting in the corner where Wade normally keeps that smile hidden away. *No more hiding*, Peter thinks, but doesn’t feel bold enough to command something like that.

“I want you,” Peter says instead. The cliché lends him courage to speak it. His blanket’s draped around his spread hips like a renaissance statue and he feels beautiful and emboldened and he blurts, “I want you more than guacamole.”

Wade laughs, but not very much. Trust and suspicion (hoping-craving-cowering) are weirdly readable all at once, which Cannot be accidental. “Guac costs extra,” he says.

“I’ll pay anything I can afford,” says Peter. He tightens his thighs around Wade’s hips, warningly. “But you’d better not skimp. I want the works. I *expect* them, boy. And I expect service with a smile, *not* with small talk.”

Wade’s mouth falls open, and the big scary merc, half-naked — *fully* naked in a more esoteric sense — and pinned between Peter’s thighs and looking up at him with sadness and surrender and — he *whimpers*.

And doesn’t try to hide it or play it off or dress it up in a joke. Just *gives* it to Peter, just like that.

“*Fuck*,” breathes Peter, and bends down to kiss him, because he *has* to. “You’re so goddamn amazing,” Peter says against Wade’s lips. “Where’d you even come from? How’d you end up in *my* klutzy hands?”

Wade gasps and tries reaching for another kiss, but Peter stays just out of reach. Another whimper, needier this time. The new-and-different odor intensifies. A lot. It’s a warm smell, a very animal smell, and Peter buries his nose in the center of Wade’s chest to breathe it in and let it coat his throat and roll around inside his head, stirring his thoughts into a dizzy swirl.

He doesn’t even realize his hand’s bent backwards to be in Wade’s pants — much less what it’s *doing* in there — until Wade’s hips buck him off-rhythm. Peter pretends to ignore Wade’s feral, frustrated whine (when actually it severs his hindbrain clean off from all those pointless “higher functions”) as he pulls his hand back out to spread Wade’s fly properly open. There’s a dizziness that’s almost like dissociation, except he feels *more* in his body, not less.

Wade squirms like a ferret pinned on its back. Adorable, and annoying.

One kiss to the newly exposed frail skin between Wade’s hipbone and belly stills the desperate roll beneath him.

A mutual holding of breath.

How funny, to reach the oh-wait-this-is-really-happening moment of heavy-breathing lucidity, minutes after it’s already begun and far too late for nervousness to catch up. *Anxiety arrives ten minutes late, with Starbucks*. Peter does laugh then, and kisses Wade’s mouth quick before Wade gets a chance to misinterpret the laughter as mockery, and smiles into the skin on Wade’s chest as he tugs back the open corners of Wade’s pants and eases elastic waistband over and down and takes a gentler, more thoughtful hold. He glances at it, less from interest and more because he should probably see what he’s working with.

Wade’s cock defies no expectation, because Peter had none to begin with.

A strangled sound of aggravation when Peter doesn’t hurry to move, and Wade tries to push up into Peter’s hand. Peter *tsks* and lets go entirely (Wade scoffs like a teen girl whose shoes have just been insulted).

Peter shrugs pitilessly down at him, then just holds his open palm there *barely* within reach, letting Wade struggle to brush up against it, to *barely* touch, nothing more.

Eventually, Wade fixes him with a mutinous glare, and goes still. He opens his mouth to complain but Peter takes him in hand again before he finds voice. Jacks him twice, to make sure he stays quiet, then simply holds him again, motionlessly. Offering Wade both a place to rest and an implicit command to stay still for it, if he wants to keep it.

(Peter’s not... totally confident that he’ll be able to *bear* this himself, if Wade’s anything but

passive. The threat of overwhelm is.... Anyway.)

The flash of understanding that passes through the sieve of Wade's features is primal, and delighted and horrified, and Peter instantly decides he wants to see that look as many times as he can before he dies. He offers Wade an indulgent, possibly condescending smile in return.

Wade studies Peter's smile with a literal side-eye. Then, decisively, Wade settles, limp except for a muted tremor here, a twitch there, small things he can't possibly help. Peter strokes him slowly, lets the "good boy" drop from his lips with less self-consciousness this time. Wade shudders when it lands. Soft contented hum. Each in his place.

"Now that that's cleared up," says Peter, and Wade chuffs — *as if there was ever any doubt* — before Peter straightens and seats himself more firmly across Wade's thighs, using his weight to hold down the insistent, reflexive pressing of Wade's hips — an involuntary disobedience, growing rapidly in strength, and that's — mm.

"Aw, poor Wade," says Peter, as his hand offers Wade a little reward for his effort to keep quiet. "No control. Can't even lay there and hold still without help. Just can't help it. Squirmy thing."

He releases Wade's cock again, idling the flat of his palm around the tip while his other hand splays along the crease of Wade's thigh as far as his fingers can reach. Wade's breath staggers, indecisive, and his hips stagger, but he doesn't say anything, and he keeps his hands to himself and his shoulders pressed firmly down on the couch. Where Peter *put* him.

Peter shifts his ass a bit closer, creeping a bit higher up Wade's body, settling, sighing, making a show of his comfort. "But look how easy it is to hold you down, though," he says. "I don't weigh anything at all and I can keep you still just by sitting on you. And not even on your face! (Yet.) Should be easy for you, then. It should be *so* easy. You *want* to stay down, don't you? You *want* to stay still for me. You'll do anything to keep me here."

Wade makes half a strangled sound before catching it, reinforcing his own silence.

"And look at that, oh, well done, keeping your damn mouth shut. Look how strong you can be, when you're trying to be good for me." Peter bends forward, watching the odd deep color of Wade Blushing creep up his throat toward his ears. "*Ohh*," Peter whispers — trying for a sympathetic tone, but he can tell it comes out way too delighted, and Wade's ears finish their color change instantly. Peter brushes his fingers over Wade's balls before jacking him like he means it this time.

Wade's body arches so tight it raises both of them a few inches off the couch. Both his hands claw into the cushion and hold it hard. His jaw grits like he's chewing on the need to cry. Maybe he is.

"Look at yourself," Peter says, not even a little disparaging. Then, just to prove how sure of it he is now: "You're *desperate*."

"Yes—"

"Oop."

Wade's eyes fly open and the curve of his spine reverses direction barely half a second before Peter stops what he's doing, removes his hands, and folds his arms across his chest.

Wade grabs onto Peter's blanketed thighs like he expects the wind to blow Peter away otherwise. And must not realize he's doing it because he blinks way too hard when Peter swats his hands away (with some regret; Wade's hands never felt so *big* to Peter before, and apparently he likes that).

“Put your hands over your mouth,” says Peter, thinking something along the lines of, maybe, big hands to help control a big mouth.

Wade obeys, layering them one on top of the other beneath his nose, elbows jutting high. He hasn’t used deodorant in a while. Do his eyes look bigger because half his face is covered, or is this an expression?

On second thought, Peter doesn’t care. He just *likes* it.

And also he likes it when, after drinking in the sight of Wade under him — mouth well shut, eyes and pants wide open, elbows splayed and Peter wonders if Wade is ticklish... Wade’s desperation collides with impatience and he twists his hips just a tiny little bit and whines like a fucking *dog*.

“Good boy,” Peter says breathlessly, stroking the side of Wade’s lower belly without thinking while his vision clears. “*Very* good boy, now keep your hands right where they are. That should make it easier, should make it nicer. Easy is nice, right?”

Wade’s breathing is harsh through his nose. He nods. Helpless little gulping sound.

Peter watches the struggle in Wade’s throat: an R-rated battle between the reflex to yell, scream, *speak*, and the valiant effort to swallow down all that voice. On the outside it just looks like an adam’s apple jumping up and down. Peter presses himself down on Wade’s hips (mm that feels good) and leans in to lick a rewarding (teasing?) stripe up that hardworking throat. Wade manages to swallow *and* make an inhuman sound at the exact same time. Such talent. Peter beams and levers himself back up.

Wade looks *terrified* for a moment when Peter starts stroking him fast and artlessly. It won’t take much more and they both know it; it’s kind of adorable, really, how that seems to worry Wade. As if Peter is going to stop after seeing him come just once.

Such low expectations beg for a hint of punishment. A little correction.

So he allows himself the temptation to slow down his strokes, to make it last just a little longer, *knowing* it’s a little cruel and somehow... not... minding?

Peter’s learning A Lot about what he likes right now, and he maybe likes *this* best of all. Holding Wade’s need for pleasure, need for *care*, so easily in his hand and in his words and on the fickle teasing edge of his *very slightest* whims.

Wade catches hold of his breath and, still under orders not to speak, begs Peter with a few soft tears from his left eye instead.

Peter gulps on an in-breath and swears on an out-breath. “You’re *hot* like this.”

For a second Wade’s eyes don’t look like they could go any wider — they’re almost scary, *that* wide — and then he scrunches them shut hard. Peter scowls, confused. Why would he try to shut out any of this? What’s there to hide *from*, now?

What’s this fabulous bastard trying to hold back for?

“You lose control of yourself all the time,” Peter remarks. “Why hold back now?”

The sound that escapes this time is an almost exact match for the sound of a small dog barking on the other side of a car window.

“Silly puppy,” Peter remarks, not really thinking about it — but takes note of the abbreviated Response it gets, files the information away for later. Now’s not for complexity, or for complexes, or for dehumanizing roleplays about coming when called. Keep it stupid simple.

“I told you I want you,” says Peter. “Aren’t you going to give me what I want? Don’t you want me to have you? Don’t you want to be my boy?”

Wade *sobs*, once, into his hands, but doesn’t answer (good boy), and won’t come.

“Don’t you want to let me see you come?” asks Peter, and honestly, he asks it in all innocence and sincerity — but Wade yells hoarsely into his palms and flushes all the way to his scalp and is spilling across Peter’s knuckles and onto his own vibrating belly but that’s the least of what’s happening, isn’t it. Wade’s soul turns inside-out and when he finally manages to open his eyes Peter can see the back wall of Wade’s very *being* in there, bare and unthinking and smiling-buddha peaceful.

Wade’s chest is straining to pull enough breath in through his nose out through his mouth and Peter’s not in the mood to see Wade black out under him, flattering as that might seem on the surface. He touches the back of Wade’s hand, and as Wade follows the implicit order and pulls his hands off of his face (almost reluctantly, which sets off a series of lightbulbs in the back of Peter’s brain about masks and gags and sensory deprivation and restraints and *possibilities*), Peter brushes his fingers down the edge of Wade’s gasping mouth, sweeping away the sweat, encouraging the continued openness. Wade’s breath is intense against the underside of Peter’s wrist.

“Very good,” Peter mumbles, which turns the panting into a disbelieving laugh.

When he looks, Wade’s staring at him. Peter physically startles — scalp prickling sharp — from that vertigo moment of suddenly not recognizing the face in front of him.

Logic supplies that it’s an expression, vast and new and profound, that he’s never seen on Wade, or probably anyone. Which means Wade’s feeling or thinking something nobody’s ever thought or felt with him before.

Peter likes this, too. Maybe even most of all.

Very much most of all.

He kisses the side of Wade’s mouth that his fingers aren’t touching, and when he looks again the new, bewildering expression also contains the pinched, watery shape he’s now confirmed as *Wade: Sexual: Desperate/Pleading*.

Peter’s skin is *way* too awake along the inside of his forearms and the backs of his thighs and everywhere else his body is touching Wade’s through clothes and fallen blanket. Dammit, why do clothes exist? Wasn’t he going to take Wade’s pants all the way off, at least...?

Wade’s mouth flaps loosely, his tongue meeting the roof of his mouth a few times, and then he gives up trying to make words. That intense expression only shifts to make room for more desperation/pleading. Wade Without Words, *goddamn* what a marvel.

Still pleading. Wade Wilson: now *there’s* a marvel. Still so much energy pent up, even covered in his own come and having sweated out half his bodyweight.

Peter shifts, suddenly aware of the pain in his jeans that his brain’s been mercifully numbing out. His thighs clamber for comfort, but find none. He should *not* be wearing jeans.

He finds he's not in the mood to remove them himself.

"Good boys have good manners," he hears himself saying, and it seems to make sense. "Thank me," he says.

It takes a moment for the words to sink in, for both of them — then Wade turns urgent, shoves himself up to sitting, plants hands on Peter's shoulders and folds him backward from the knees (he's still straddling Wade's thighs) until Peter feels the armrest behind his shoulder blades.

As Peter settles back, feeling strangely cozy centered here in Wade's hyperfocus, he decides that if his mouth is going to go on some kinda decisive, demanding, Spider-Man autopilot every time they start touching each other, it'll work out tremendously well for both of them.

Wade's eyes follow his hands down Peter's chest — reverse direction to impatiently hike the hem of Peter's shirt up just past his nipples before retracing downward again. Peter expects, and braces, to feel some aimless roaming touch over all his skin, since Wade went to the trouble of exposing so much of it. But that doesn't happen. Only Wade's stare roams. His hands are much more focused.

And unhurried. And precise. And purposeful. And exactly as Peter's seen them when they were assembling a long-range weapon on a rooftop when Deadpool didn't know anyone was watching and Spider-Man was ~~trying to decide~~ *pretending* to try to decide whether to stop him now, or in just another minute. Y'know. For observation.

Spider-Man did eventually stop Deadpool that night, but talked himself into hitting the snooze button on it more than once. There was time for it. It was a complicated weapon, some on-brand overkill that demanded Deadpool's attention, his time, the measured care of his hands. Those hands, and the aura of zen calm that flowed down the precise movements of Deadpool's shoulders — it was all fascinating, if subliminally so.

Peter knows why now. It's pretty much the same now. Though he'd hardly describe Wade's current aura as "calm".

A cat at a mousehole may not be wasting any movement, but it's hardly calm.

Peter tries, and fails, not to wonder why Wade seems so much more tense on the verge of a sexual favor than of murder. Especially since by all rights Wade *should* be feeling Extremely Relaxed right now.

The answer, like the question, reveals itself through Wade's hands, this time in how they curve around the tops of Peter's thighs like they're strapping him in: the difference is something to do with how invested Wade is in whether the target escapes.

Which says something sad about how many shots Wade believes he'll get the chance to take, and how he weighs his chances of not missing the mark somehow.

— Which is a step too far, for Peter, in the direction of using sex-as-murder for a comparison — but where else is he supposed to take it, with Wade Wilson hovering over him and lining him up for disassembly with unnervingly steady focus?

"Am I allowed to talk yet?" says Wade.

Cheeky and circular of him to presume he's allowed the privilege of speech to ask for the privilege of speech, but Peter decides to let it slide. It's not like they negotiated, so he hardly has the right to be high and mighty.

“You’re allowed to ask me for what you want,” says Peter. “And you’re allowed to tell me what you feel.” He’s very sure of this. As his body luxuriously tenses, his mind seems to relax and settle in its proper place, somewhere around his heart. And with his mind so firmly seated, it’s safe to release everything else, every extraneous thought and awful memory, and let it drift away unwatched. In this extra space where all his upsetting thoughts used to be, there’s clarity. The answers are coming from there. That’s how he’s so sure of them.

“I wanna take off your stupid pants,” says Wade.

Given a drink, he’d have done a spit-take. “I said you could *ask* for what you want,” says Peter. “Did that sound like *asking* to you?”

“You said I could *tell* you how I feel, and I *feel* like taking off your stupid pants.”

“Too bad you didn’t phrase it that way the first time.”

Wade gives the most high-pitched, scandalized scoff ever to issue from someone with a Y chromosome.

Peter lifts his brows, mildly. “I’m sorry, did you want something or didn’t you?”

”Yeah, but I—“

“Is this how you show your thanks?”

Wade has enough self-control to limit his swearing to Spanish and German only. “Please, sir,” he says in Oliver Twist falsetto (which breaks down rapidly into frustrated horny snarl — which is flattering as hell because didn’t he *just* get off?), “may I take off your stupid fucking pants so that I can show you how I’d *really* like to thank you?”

“Of course. Nobody hates these pants more than me right now.”

“Sir thank you sir!”

Peter’s not sure about the “sir” — he associates it with JARVIS, so it feels kind of sarcastic here — but doesn’t say so because it’s distracting how fast Wade can divest another man of pants. Way faster than Peter’s ever gotten them off himself, in life-or-death Spider-Man emergency or any other circumstance. You’d think there were secret velcro seams.

Wade hikes his own knees up then, levering Peter’s legs up from beneath. From there Wade grabs him by the ankles — just grabs ‘em, no nuance or ceremony here — and more or less tosses them over his shoulders, where they stay, with Wade’s hands on his shins locking them in place. “*Wrap your legs — ‘round my head —*“ Wade sings in a Tim McGraw twang, “*— and wear you like a feedbaaag —*“

There was definitely a second verse on its way but Wade seems to have forgotten what he was doing. His hungry look turns to unselfconscious, unbreaking gaze as he looks down the length of Peter’s bare legs to Peter’s bare everything else.

“Only questions until I say otherwise,” says Peter.

Wade nods. His eyes are still thirsty, still drinking. He looks for a long time. Peter lets the moment unspool, unspoiled. His erection waits the whole time, undeterred, which is somehow both surprising and not at all. Determination has gotten it to last this long, why not longer?

Wade's face looks the same as always but *feels* like something different when it's between Peter's calves. Peter's never felt his texture there before. He adds another layer of meaning to his definition of intimacy.

Wade opens his mouth, then closes it; Peter reaches for him with both hands, calling him in. Wade bends over him, and Peter can feel Wade's belly rub (painful! but only just) against the underside of his cock as he holds Wade's face in his hands.

Wade's neck is turned up at a sharp angle. He's straining for eye contact and maybe about to cry.

He turns Wade's face toward his heart, easing the pressure on Wade's neck.

When Peter kisses him in the middle of the forehead, it Means something. Peter's not sure what, not yet, but he understands that they're both ready for it, and he knows that it feels Right.

Wade feels it too. Peter can tell by the sigh, and by Wade turning his head to rest his ear against Peter's chest, and then after a little shuffle of weight there's a hand stroking Peter's cock but compared to the weight of Wade resting on his heart there's no question which pleasure is the greater, the one he'll rub himself off to later, the one he'll miss more if this all ends someday.

"This make you happy?" Wade mumbles, without moving his head, his breath bouncing across Peter's nipple. "This feel good? This touch okay?" he goes on without waiting for an (unnecessary) answer.

His hand goes on as well, also not waiting for an answer. "You know you're the strong one? But do you remember it or do you want reminders? You like me to show you how I can never forget you're so much stronger than me? You like me bent over you groveling at your heart, baby boy? You feel big? Bigger than me? You like me curled up small tryna help you feel good whatever small stupid way I can? You like *me* to be the one desperate for *you* to be the one to come?"

Peter presses a hand against Wade's ear, holding his head in place. His thumb slides down to touch the back of Wade's neck. His other hand is pinned between their bodies in consequence of poor planning. His knees look stupid hiked up over Wade's back and his balls feel tight and so does everything else.

"Are you enjoying this, baby boy? Does this make you wanna keep me? Wanna see your name all over my body? This make you wanna feel my mouth on you instead of my hand? You wanna know how this over-rehearsed tongue of mine can perform with your aching cock as a captive audience? You wanna know? Can I show you? Please, baby boy?"

He starts to move down as he speaks these last few questions but by the time his head is out of range of Peter's hand and there's breath on his cock Peter's *gone*.

He comes tense and violent and it's over too fast to savor any of it and he can't be arsed to care because when he opens his eyes, Wade is up on one elbow with a bit of come on his ribs and a grin that looks... happier, maybe, than most of his smiles. And Peter *does* get a chance to savor that.

Plus, they *both* came too fast from just hand stuff and dirty talk. If Peter's going to be mocked for that one, he's bringing Wade down with him.

Oh, who's he kidding. He's bringing Wade with him *everywhere* from now on if he can help it. Excuse me, sir, but that's my emotional support mercenary.

Wade spreads his fingers, stretching the come between them. "You hear the one about why Spider-Man's hands are so sticky?" he says.

It takes Peter a minute to regain balance, to answer. Then: “Go wash, you gross old gremlin,” he says.

Wade wipes his hand, front and back, on the back of the couch. Peter cries out.

“That’s not washing! Tell me you’re not in the habit of doing that,” says Peter.

“Hey-hey, you said ‘tell’ this time, not ‘ask’!”

“Don’t abuse the privilege to deflect.”

“If god wanted us to use napkins,” Wade says, sensibly, “he wouldn’t have invented sleeves.”

Peter side-eyes the smear on the couch. Well that went from hot to the-bad-kind-of-nasty really fast. He should’ve expected as much. “God didn’t ask for shit. *I* asked you to wash.”

“Sure thing, *mom*.”

“How many times have I touched this thing with my bare face? Wade. How many times have you done this.”

“It’s *not* a habit! Well I mean. Not *really*. Not so much with the couch. Don’t talk about the Lay-Z-Boy I used to have, may her memory be a blessing. And never point a UV light at my bed. Or the oven mitts. But I wouldn’t say it’s a *habit*. I can stop any time.”

“Please do. Stop *that* and also stop talking. Just. Stop.”

“As you wish.”

Peter sighs through his nose. “You ever notice what assholes Wesley and Buttercup actually are to each other for like half of that movie?”

“That’s what makes them the perfect reference material for you and me.”

“I was kind of hoping we could get to more of an Inigo-slash-Fezzik place, to be honest.”

“Please. They’re *married*. Give us time, snookums.”

Peter’d tell him to wipe that grin off his face, except that Peter loves that grin. (And Wade would probably wipe it off on the back of the couch, just to be gross.) Peter kisses him instead, which makes the grin widen, which makes for an awkward kiss so Peter stops. “Don’t call me ‘snookums’,” he says. “And I thought I told you to stop talking.”

Wade mimes zippering his mouth shut, and they unfold together until their limbs have straightened out and Wade’s maneuvered Peter into Little Spoon. Peter’s always had one hell of a hunch that Wade prefers Little Spoon — and not just because Peter would rather be Big Spoon nine times out of ten — and this current arrangement doesn’t dissuade him of that notion. This feels more like Wade is just making good and goddamn sure that Peter can’t leave without him getting a chance to try and prevent it.

“You won’t have to,” Peter mumbles.

“Sleepy twink says what?”

“What?”

A breath of quiet laughter and a kiss land behind his ear, and that's it for a while.

When Peter comes to — it really feels more like recovering from a knockout than from a nap — his Big Spoon's sitting up and Peter's lying between his outstretched legs, head pillowed on his stomach. Peter doesn't remember turning onto his back, or being manhandled onto his back. Yep, definitely more like a knockout.

Wade's forearms are heavy on Peter's shoulders, hands dangling right around heart level. Peter feels contained, contented. He reaches slowly and takes Wade's loose hands in his own.

"I like waking up like this," he says. "How long did we sleep?"

"Me, maybe twenty minutes. You, 'bout an hour, hour and a half."

"Felt longer."

"You were out cold."

Peter pretends to consider. "Nah," he says. "I feel all warm and stuff." On impulse he pulls on Wade's hands and mashes them against his face. Wade's silent belly-laugh bounces Peter's head around, so instead of nuzzling his whole face into Wade's hands as intended, Peter ends up kinda bapping himself repeatedly with them across his forehead and cheeks.

"Dorkus," says Wade, extracting his hands. "You're a danger to yourself."

Because he's feeling stupid, Peter sings, "*You understand I've got a plan for us, I bet you didn't know that I was dangerous. It must be fate, I found a place for us, I bet you didn't know someone could love you this much.*"

Wade squawks. "*And a song about stalking? What's next, breakfast in bed? This must be the part they call lovebombing.*"

"Oh, don't say bombing."

"Long as you don't stop doing it."

Peter gives up trying to interpret that right away. "You're my favorite weirdo," he decides.

He feels Wade's kiss on the top of his head. It's all Wade can reach. "Never woulda goddamn thought," says Wade.

"Hm? Thought what?"

Wade squirms under and behind him; it makes the whole world move, because Wade *is* the whole world. The bedrock holding everything up, and the center of all gravity holding everything down.

"Wade...?"

He chuffs. "*You. Spoutin' off shit like that. To me. While I'm awake. Or asleep, come to think of it. My dreams are never this nice to me.*"

Peter squares his jaw against a low-key burble of grumpiness. Rising to his knees and flipping himself over, he slots his fingers between the ridges of Wade's ribs and squeezes as if that could hold Wade together, and puts a firm, protective kiss over Wade's heart. The pulse stutters under his

lips but keeps going, strong. “Guess I have my work cut out for me,” says Peter, “if that’s going to change.”

There’s another stagger in Wade’s pulse, but not a good one. Peter can almost *hear* the downshift in mood before Wade even opens his mouth. “Y’know, for someone who’s so dead-set against social connections turning you into a project, you sure are quick to start thinkin’ of me as one.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“You can’t *fix* me, baby boy.”

Peter shifts his grip from Wade’s sides to Wade’s ears. “The thought never crossed my mind,” he says, honestly. “I just... want you to have something *good* in your life. That won’t turn on you or *use* you or... or disappear.”

“Says the guy who—“

“I came *back*, didn’t I?”

Wade looks away as far as Peter’s grip will let him, which isn’t very. “Took you long enough.”

Peter sighs and rests his forehead against Wade’s collarbone. Wade, despite his hurt feelings, buries his nose in Peter’s hair and takes a deep sniff; maybe he can’t help it.

Peter certainly can’t.

“I’ll never do that again,” says Peter. “Even if I have to take off for Spider-Man stuff, I’ll — I won’t just up and leave you like that again. Not without saying anything. I won’t. Not ever.”

Wade snorts. “Well that’s just adorable.”

“Wade—“

“Please.”

“Wade, I—“

“No, please, I mean it, just stop. Don’t ruin this by— Don’t go makin’ any fuckin’ promises. Don’t do me any favors. Don’t — don’t do that to me, *please*. Just ‘cause I’m used to it doesn’t mean I can take it. Not from... not from you.”

Peter stares at him; Wade looks away again, fast, burned.

Peter draws a slow thumb across Wade’s cheekbone, wiping away a nonexistent tear. Trying to think of what to say.

“Please. Peter.”

His proper name, as if Peter didn’t already know how serious Wade’s being. For a little while Peter studies him, feeling emotions shaking inside them both and not knowing how to put name to any of them. “Well...” he says, slowly, “how about right now?”

Suspicion. “How d’you mean?”

Peter kisses his temple, making his eyes close again. “I mean just... now. I’m here right now,” he says. Kisses the edge of Wade’s jaw, making him swallow. “I’m with you.” Kisses his closed

eyelid, making him draw in a wet breath. “I’ve got you.”

And Wade groans, looking like he’s resigned to having a long, hard cry later, in private. (Peter knows it’s still futile to try and make him understand yet that if Wade’s going to be sobbing, it’ll be in Peter’s arms, and nowhere else, and that’s that. Some things you just have to demonstrate, when the time comes.) The tension in Wade’s body releases like a balloon; they both sink deeper into the couch. “Truer words, baby boy,” he sighs. “You fuckin’ *got* me.”

Peter tries to kiss the sigh away from Wade’s mouth, but only succeeds in drawing out a second one. “I was a complete cowardly *dick*,” he says, “with my head up my ass,” he says, “— I was a dick and an ass and I was the dickhead up my own ass —” he adds, and yeah, Wade snrks at that, worth it — “and I want to make it up to you. We can’t make like it never happened, I know that, ok, but I want to show you it doesn’t have to happen again. I want to show you what you *really* mean to me. I want to show you something good, I want to *give* you...

“But if you don’t want it to mean that, if that’s too much or not believable or whatever, if you just want this to be... whatever it wants to be, then I’ll keep my promises to myself. We can just, like... lean up against this... this thing here, whatever this is. You on one side, me on the other, and this way we don’t have to sleep with our heads in the mud. Whatever you need, Wade, *god* I just want you to feel safe, *please*.”

Wade huffs a laugh. “Shit, you really do believe that, don’t you.”

“Of course.”

Before Wade can come up with more arguments or snark, Peter finds Wade’s hands and laces their fingers together, palm to palm, and palm to palm again. He raises their joined hands up to where Wade can see them all mismatched and intertangled and tight. Peter allows his fingertips to stick to the back of Wade’s hands, allows Wade to feel that deceptively gentle tugging on his tortured skin.

And Wade stares at their joined fists, at first uncomprehending, then nervous and wry, then, as the thing he’s looking at doesn’t waver or disappear or become something else, by degrees with only stark, point-blank disbelief.

“Huh,” Wade says.

“There you are,” says Peter.

“Hard to believe this is the same fic,” Wade says, and if his voice was any softer it’d be a whisper. He seems unable to look away from their joined hands. “If this scene’s from my POV it’s gonna be *embarrassing*.”

“Since when are you afraid to be the center of attention.”

Peter dips his head and kisses the first knuckle on each of Wade’s hands in turn. Wade tries, one last time, to huff and scoff, but his bluster’s abandoned him. He doesn’t seem to have any defenses left.

This is a dangerous moment for Wade, Peter knows (even if he doesn’t exactly *understand*, and he can suss that out later), but it brings a gentle smile to Peter’s face anyway, because Wade’s right here in his hands, and there’s no reason at all to leave him, and every reason to stay, and Peter’s damn well going to do his utmost to make absolutely fucking *certain* that Wade comes out on the other side of this danger, whole and unharmed.

He *owes* Wade that — but very much more to the point, he *wants* to.

He *wants to* with deep parts of his heart that he didn't even know *existed* until right now.

Holy shit he wants to so bad he loses his breath.

And all he has to do is Stay Here and Be With Wade. *How* did he suddenly get so lucky?

Wade lifts eyes to him, slowly, blinking once and so *open* like his geode soul's turned inside-out and almost before his gaze reaches Peter's face, Peter surges forward and crashes their mouths together, heedless rushing moaning hungry *god* his chest is so deliciously tight and — it's a second or two before Wade is kissing back, lips buzzing with a high needy sound that cuts straight through everything Peter *is*. Cuts through him and out the back of him and into whatever's beyond him and *yes*, Peter would stand still and spread his arms and let himself go to ribbons a hundred thousand times if it would make Wade happy enough to make *that sound*.

Courage is easy when thinking is hard. And thinking is hard when dicks are.

Courage lives in the hands and Peter's are strong and assertive, the left one content to rest firm at the center of Wade's chest, holding him centering him reminding him, the right one heat-seeking and unafraid of the dark. The surface of Wade's underwear is too smooth to be cotton and Peter's fingers enjoy it, riding weightlessly, tracing the outlines of Wade's body through the thin frictionless—

He glances down and both Pinky *and* The Brain look back up at him, guilelessly smiling here, scheming there. “Narf,” says Peter, involuntarily.

“Say wha?”

“Your underwear says wha.”

“Wha? Animaniacs undies not sexy? Or just the wrong character set? I *wanted* Slappy Squirrel but they didn't have any...”

“Sexy” wouldn't have been the first adjective to come to mind, no — but it's such a very Wade thing, a very perfect Wade thing, Peter's mood cozies up to affection. His fingers draw an outline along Wade's jaw. The texture is Right. Peter shudders, grunts a sound of simple happiness.

How can capital-N-italicized *Needs* this heavy-metal mad-max *Intense* ride so lightly on the bare back of such a delicate, soft feeling?

Wade looking at him, without needing to perform an expression. Wade in Pinky and The Brain underwear. Wade more than content to lie between Peter's legs and be stripped by Peter's hands and nobody's going anywhere tonight without the other one and Peter needs to kiss him again. Right now.

His hands bury themselves in Wade Texture, his hands *devour* texture. The solid mass of Wade Weight wrapped inside Wade Texture rises and curves like waves to follow his hands as they aimlessly slide, returning to circle and tighten at the spots that changed Wade's breathing. It's a little tricky to touch and to kiss at the same time, and Peter's attention lapses slightly at one, then the other, but he manages a balance, and Wade is definitely happy to take command of the kissing whenever Peter's mind turns to hands-and-skin...

...until finally Wade turns his face to one side to give his mouth some room and says, “Please,” without elaboration.

Peter doesn't ask *Please what?* It's not up to Wade, really, not at this point.

Only, the part of Peter that makes conscious choices is still a little stiff, a little rusty, a little scared. Resistant to the certainty that arises from the silent place, because it's silent. Listening with one ear for clocks or footsteps, one eye scanning the wall for handwritten signs of guidance.

Pause.

Take stock.

Peter is exhaling. Now he's inhaling. The stink of Taco Bell sauce packets makes his sinuses tingle. Now he's exhaling, and because his face is so close to Wade's, Wade closes his eyes against the air stream.

Wade opens his eyes again at the bottom of Peter's out-breath, and Peter doesn't know or care what color those eyes are. It's hard to see colors in the dim light anyway. Peter is inhaling, and so is Wade. Their chests-containing-hearts are moving in tandem. Wade's hand is wrapped around Peter's left shoulder, is engulfing it because size is relative, is holding onto it for balance and anchor and boundary. Peter is exhaling, and his body is Wade's handrail.

Wade is exhaling, and his out-breath carries something that's just passed through his heart. Peter inhales, and receives it carefully.

"You trust me," says Peter. It isn't a question.

"I dunno what that means," says Wade. Does he mean "that" as in the general concept of trusting someone, or "that" as in what it implies for him to trust Peter specifically?

"You don't need to," says Peter, because no matter what Wade meant, it's still an honest reply. Wade doesn't answer this time, but inhales-exhales deeper, more thorough, more awake.

Take stock.

Wade's second hand is curled between their chests, trapped but happily so, and Peter can feel the fingers' temptation to uncurl and to grasp. Peter can feel Wade *wanting*.

They take turns breathing in opposite directions.

"You love me," says Peter. Also not a question. (Wade starts to talk, changes his mind.) It's a presumptuous statement no matter how true, and maybe he should feel bad for being presumptuous, but he doesn't; nor does he care about his lack of caring. Maybe that makes him a dick, but he doesn't care about that, either. Wade With Him and Wade Breathing are the only things he's happy to care about just at present.

He releases the tension his neck was secretly carrying, and moves one of his thumbs — barely an inch, but Wade's lower body gives an electric jerk of appreciation. Peter finds reassurance there. His hands find their courage again, and begin to move with it.

He plays a little, and explores a lot. There's time.

Peter has no idea what he's doing — *should* have no idea what he's doing.

With Harry, he just followed direction, and that's easy enough, if ungratifying. They barely let their knees touch, and didn't really look at each other.

With Gwen, he was more passionate, but she held back and kept herself aloof and seemed to silently disapprove of everything Peter tried to do — while putting forth no ideas of her own —

expecting him to perform along (to *lead* the performance) according to some secret script that he hadn't read.

And with Gwen, when Peter broke down laughing, because it was either that or crying, instead of laughing with him and trying again with less... *seriousness*... Gwen scrubbed her hand over her face and got up from her bed, leaving him, saying she was going to order a pizza, and not saying whether she was coming back to bed to try again. (She didn't. Peter waited, awkward in his sideways-twisted t-shirt, until his skin got cold and he pulled his jeans back on to join her in the kitchen, where he found her elbows-on-counter, texting someone.)

But Wade — is... is *Wade*. Is open to every touch and lick and kiss Peter gives him, is opening *more* to every touch. He seems to like *everything*. Like, *really* like it, not just putting on a show to keep things going while he waits for it to start to be good — his cock is twitching and leaking, and his eyes, when Peter dares to look, are bleary and black and trained on Peter so hard and unbreaking that Peter blushes all the way down to his chest. Wade couldn't have a gentle stare if he tried, and god, if that doesn't go straight to Peter's dick.

"Sweet merciful horseshit," Wade says when he sees Peter flush. "God, baby boy, you're fucking perfect. I can't — how do you even — do you ever fuckin' *look* at yourself? Fuck, just... just fuckin' *look* at you. Peter — Paul and Mary, the ghost of Freddie Mercury has a hard-on for you, Oscar Wilde would rise from the dead just to worship your cock, Petey, fu-*uuck*, this ain't real, no way is this—"

Peter bites Wade's lip to stop him talking, because that's not the best dirty talk, but word-shaped burbles keep popping out of Wade's mouth and into his until Peter pushes further and swipes his tongue into Wade's deep, soft, stupid mouth and Wade lapses into just... noises. Hungry ones. Huge hands wrap tight around Peter's back, digging and releasing, down to his ass (Peter's spine rolls like it's made of sinew instead of bone; Wade groans lower around Peter's tongue) and back up to his shoulders.

Peter's skin has never been this awake without dire consequences. Wade's scent and heat are a barrier between his overhyped senses and the too-big-too-loud world, Wade's skin is an anchor for his hands, grounding for the electricity in his brain. He wants to touch *everything*. Wants to lick and bite everything, wants to... wants to cover Wade's entire body with himself, or roll in him like a dog in grass, wants to experience Wade Wilson broken and Wade Wilson miraculously nonverbal and... Wade Wilson *his*.

Yes, that's the one.

Only a small sound, too pleased to be a whimper, follows him when he leaves Wade's mouth.

"*Mine*," he says, lips too heavy.

Wade wraps a leg around Peter's lower back, then the other. Ankles hook behind Peter's hips and lock him in. Peter can barely take a breath, the feel of Wade's texture and burning and weight all around him like that, and — god, he almost loses it right then.

Wade holds him together with a palm cupped around either side of Peter's neck, a soft hold, but Peter knows what those hands can do to a man's neck, and — his lungs try to inhale and exhale at the same time. Peter reaches down a frantic hand to grip the base of his own cock so tight it almost hurts because he can't come yet, he can't leave Wade behind like that.

When *inhale* and *exhale* disentangle themselves from each other and he can open his eyes again, Wade's looking at him from inches away with... no one's ever, ever looked at Peter like that. Or

at anyone else. It's brand new to the entire world. He stares back in awe, feels his mouth drop open like an idiot but who the fuck cares because that *look* makes him feel more golden and heroic than anything he's ever done with his mask on.

"Yours," Wade says.

And who knew that's the only thing Peter's ever wanted? Think of all the time and money he could've saved. All the super-saver rewards cards he didn't need.

Peter kisses him, because what else could he possibly do? Wade's mouth cants up for more, but no, this isn't a sex kiss, not entirely, and — fuck, does this man read minds? — Wade settles back and just returns warmth for warmth, though Peter can feel the full length of Wade's body quiver from this phenomenal exertion of self-control.

And oh, Peter's going to *break* that.

He moves his fingertips in circles around the sides of Wade's head, and moves his kisses in a meandering path until Wade's face is covered, until Wade's eyes are closed, until there's not a single care left in Wade's expression. What did Peter ever do to deserve that kind of trust?

He doesn't realize that he's stopped kissing and has just been looking at Wade's face — so much calmer than he's ever seen it before, including in sleep, including in *death* — until Wade opens his eyes, and, without even a trace of smirk, says, "If I'm yours, prove it." There's just the barest hint there, of fear or desperation or both, buried deep under his tone where he thinks Peter can't detect it.

But he does detect it, and it makes his heart crackle, and determination washes through him so strongly he feels drugged.

"Damn right I'll prove it," Peter says, with no idea where the words are coming from. Hearing them for the first time as much as Wade is. Must be from that silent place again. "I'm gonna ride that gorgeous cock of yours right off the edge of the earth, and you're gonna lie down deep here where the couch is warm and I know you're safe, and with me up there holding you down here I'm gonna watch you fall apart. You're gonna show me all those things you're trying to hide from your tone of voice — don't think I didn't hear that, Wilson — and when you're so close you're scared to hold your eyes open, I'm gonna wrap you up in my arms and *that's* where you'll come, Wade, in my arms and in *me* where I know you'll be safe 'cause you're *mine*."

Wade's jaw drops wide open. Cartoonishly wide. His chin makes a soft *bap* against his chest. It could be funny, but Peter's not laughing. He just smiles, very softly, and brushes his fingers under Wade's chin, not even trying to push it closed, just touching him where he is.

"I'm going to take *such good care* of you, Wade. And tonight we're going to sleep touching each other, and tomorrow we'll wake up and still be touching each other. That's not a promise, it's just how it is. If the place burns down around our ears I'll just pick you up and carry you to a roof somewhere. We can nest together like fat happy pigeons."

A breath finally escapes Wade's mouth, a shocked hiss of air. And that's how Peter knows that this time, Wade *believes him*.

Well done, Parker.

Genuinely. Well done.

Peter kisses him on one side of his gaping mouth, then the other, and then Wade finally shuts it.

“How’s that sound to you?” Peter whispers into his ear.

Wade chokes and nods emphatically. “Tha’s... Good start. Gooooood start.”

One time, Gwen Stacy was Peter’s girlfriend.

The buildup had been killer and by the time they crossed that boundary together using words, a switch flipped inside Peter. A secret switch that even he didn’t know he had.

And no, that *isn’t* a terrible, cliché metaphor for anything remotely related to puberty or Chopin-style “awakening”.

It’s just — when Gwen agreed to date him, Peter discovered that his “no touchie” function even *has* a switch. That he’s even *capable* of operating in some kind of personal-boundaries mode other than OH HELL NO.

He should not have been surprised to learn that its inverse is OH HELL YES.

But he was surprised.

So was Gwen.

Mostly they just hugged, and he spent a lot of time feeling out the textures of her hair and hands, and seeing how many ways he could configure his arms around her no matter where they were or what kind of chair she was sitting in (or whether she was trying to do homework or talk to her dad or pull books out of her locker — Peter knows he’s not blameless). They kissed only some — Gwen liked to use fake-strawberry chapstick and Peter doesn’t like fake-strawberry flavor, and he couldn’t decide whether it would be rude to ask her to use something else, so he just avoided kissing instead, and was planning to cleverly gift her some other flavor chapstick — and outside that one failed attempt that ended in delivery pizza, they had sex twice, both times so lost and fumbling that even Peter was embarrassed for them.

She would giggle and tell him “You’re so weird,” which was something she’d always said to him, affectionately.

But as soon as they started dating, almost to the *hour*, she started saying it so much more often that it took on a different timbre. And she started saying it to him in front of other people, too. Which was a new development.

Peter misses a lot of stuff other people pick up on, but he’s not *stupid*. He knew she was unhappy about *something*. He asked her, but she wouldn’t say what.

The next day he asked her again, and she pretended they were late for their bus even though they still had an extra six minutes.

Gwen was Peter’s girlfriend for four and a half days. From Wednesday afternoon through a three-day weekend with her parents out of town, and all of it over before Monday morning homeroom.

Almost a year later he found out that when most people say “let’s just be friends” it’s a bizarre euphemism for “I never want to see you again,” but when *Gwen* said “let’s be friends”, she meant it literally. Words always had a way of retaining their value when they came from Gwen’s mouth. Her mouth was beautiful like that, even if it did taste like fake-strawberry.

(Peter begins to notice a pattern with him and people's mouths.)

But just because they got to be friends again (however performative the renewed friendship was on her part), that didn't make it suck any less that she changed her mind about being his girlfriend so fast, after so little chance. And there were still those long weeks after the breakup where the two of them weren't *anything* to each other because he couldn't talk to her, because every time he tried to, he'd have to clench his jaw shut to keep his heart from escaping out from between his teeth.

And... just because that's how it happened with Gwen, it doesn't mean that Wade will be like her.

After this past Tuesday, Peter would have to undergo some pretty serious head trauma to be cynical about the staying power of Wade's friendship. But this isn't *friendship*, is it. It's on *top* of friendship, but it's something quite different. Now they've crossed that certain line together, he can look back and see the difference. What he *can't* see is what's ahead.

Peter figures they'll have about four days together.

Yes it's superstitious, no it's not rational at all, but the fact still remains that Peter is already panicking — just, the panic is set on a timer and the countdown detonates in about four and a half days.

(He's *really* got to cool it with the bomb metaphors. For, like, the rest of his life probably.)

Four and a half days go by.

On the fourth-and-three-quarters day, Wade sidles up cautiously, asks if he can touch, then braces one arm around Peter's chest and uses the other hand to try and rub some life back into the knots between Peter's shoulder blades, and asks him what's the matter.

The breath is shaking in Peter's lungs, so his voice comes out shaky too. "I need to know when you're kicking me out," he says. "I don't have an apartment anymore and I need to have a plan."

Wade's hand goes still. "Every time you say something like that, I have to work — like really *work*, and it's *hard*, y'know? — not to laugh my ass off," he says, sounding not at all like he wants to laugh. "'Cause I know you're not joking, but like — you gotta be joking, right?"

"You did it before," Peter points out.

With a sigh (that might actually be an aggravated groan, and Peter understands; he's every bit as aware of his hypocrisy as he is unable to help it) Wade wraps his second arm around Peter and clonks his forehead against the back of Peter's head, too hard. "Ow. Okay look, I can't promise that I won't ever do that again," he says, and his breath is almost unbearable across Peter's nape. "But I *can* promise to only do it if I really, really think it'll be better for *you* that way."

Peter makes a face. "Forgive me if I'm disinclined to trust your judgment on the matter," he says. "Because first of all, how the hell would you know better than I do what is or isn't good for me, and secondly, I know where your self-esteem stands, and according to *that* so-called logic, you never should've let me in here to begin with."

Wade's chest is pressed up to Peter's back, so Peter can feel it when he stops breathing for a few moments.

"...I'm greedy," Wade shrugs, eventually. "Wanna see just how much? I'll show you, but I have to be on my knees for it..." His arms tighten, with Peter inside them.

No better place.

Chapter End Notes

Smut-specific tags for this chapter: bad BDSM etiquette, soft D/s dynamics, dirty talk, hand jobs, porn with feelings

I broke up with tumblr. Find me, if you like, on [Pillowfort](#) (most active), Discord (@chinashopbull#6564), or [Dreamwidth](#).

A note on future updates:

There are four more chapters left in the outline. This, however, is the last one (before The Actual Last One) that doesn't end on a cliffhanger, and also, being a very happy and healing chapter, makes a natural place to consciously pause.

Times being what they are (Oct 2020 as of this writing), and my update frequency being what it's been, I would far rather risk this being the final posted chapter than any of the next several meant to come. I'll endeavor to continue working on this fic. If, by happy circumstance, I am able to genuinely Complete this work, I won't be posting the last chapters as I complete them, but will wait until all of them are finished and post them at the same time. This is to avoid the risk of leaving you with a cliffhanger or angst as the final note played, when from the very beginning I've promised you a happy ending.

I hope you find this decision agreeable, and may the times be kind to you and yours.

Novocaine For the Soul

Chapter Summary

In which several people jump to several conclusions, the boxes have an awful lot to say, and the author doesn't know shit about sticking with a POV.

Chapter warnings: The boxes being rampant gaslighters, domestic violence (sort of?), oh and one more cliffhanger. Y'know, for yuks.

Oh and, you will hate me. You will really hate me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter's daze is a happy one and it goes on for weeks' worth of soothing images and sensory impressions.

There's the tangled bliss of fingers in his hair, and although he couldn't explain it exactly, he's learned now why dogs go all squinty-eyed when you pet them just right.

There's the boneless relief of someone heavier than him lying down on top of him.

There's cinnamon seeming to warm the frosty air early in the morning after the night the heat broke, and the toasted feeling in his legs when he comes to stand next to Wade in front of the warm oven.

There's the friendly colors of animation pulsing across the screen and his blanket tacoed around his shoulders turning him into a plush hillside.

There's the steaming bath of salted water and Wade invading his privacy to kneel in front of the tub and present him excitedly with one rubber duckie and half a dozen plastic boats from the dollar store, all of which are sunk one by one by the wind-up shark, who ends up marrying the duckie (apparently the shark's long-lost amnesiac lover) at the end.

There's Wade too trembling and sweat-slick to hold onto, begging to be held tighter anyway.

There's Wade slumped over an armrest on the couch, napping, and Peter unceremoniously pushing his unconscious body over, spilling him across the cushions. Then before Wade can get too cranky about the interruption, Peter lies facedown on top of him and, with the kind of brisk, deep sigh of a sleeping dog, goes limp, putting an immediate end to Wade's incoherent griping. There's fingers in his hair again until they both drift off this time.

There's the forbidden-feeling shiver low in his body at the words "baby boy" and a growing heat behind the unsaid wish to find a nickname with the same effect on Wade.

There's the shared rooftop cigarette passed back and forth like a dirty secret and the thrill of daring to not give a crap for once.

There's the trip to a franchise craft store to load up on early Christmas string lights and literally

every Chanukah wall decoration in stock and then getting home and Wade hot-gluing them to every spot Peter points to until the whole place is as shiny and bright as an anime daydream.

Winter can't touch them.

Peter holds on longer whenever he can. There's something small, a little bit fearful, seasoning his motivation, but he can't name it, nor does he care to. Neither of them, he thinks, wants to be the first to let go, to pull away. There's been more than enough of that already.

Wade settles into his form-fitting role as anchor whether he's aware of it or not. Peter has no doubt he's up to the challenge, as long as he doesn't think about it too much, and if that means he has to remain unaware of it, Peter won't be the one to enlighten him.

Wade doesn't want to continue the story; it feels like pressing his luck. Naked and wrapped up in Petey's spider-limbs, he closes his eyes and tries to make time stop. Just turn everything into one big splash page, one big foldout image where everything is exactly this perfect and there is no monster at the end of the book, friendly or otherwise.

But then he looks at the clock just as the glowing green stick-numbers change from 11:34 to 11:35. The colon between hour and minute won't stop blinking.

Time's a merciless bitch. Like an ex-wife who keeps your *Avatar: The Last Airbender* DVD box sets, not because she wants to watch them, but just because they're really and rightfully yours and she wants that trophy, that tangible proof that you're still suffering, that you're still missing *something* even if it isn't her.

[Not that you'd know anything about that.]

Petey will wake up and this whole delicious moment will be gone and they'll be that much closer to inevitable disaster.

{Or you'll spend this whole COULD-be-delicious moment freaking out about impermanence and THEN the moment will be gone because you're WASTING it.}

[Remember what Thich Nhat Hanh says?]

Wade breathes in and out and notices how Petey's fingers are pinker than the rest of his hand, how the calluses on his first two knuckles are paler, how the hand curves like a piano player's against Wade's chest.

[Well he HAS been playing you like a well-tuned instrument.]

Wade smacks his forehead with the heel of his hand. *Shaddap in there*, he thinks.

{Sorry, big guy. The plot must go on.}

But WHY? Wade thinks.

{Because getting together and consummating the relationship isn't the end of the story in real life, it's the beginning.}

[And here MY fortune cookie just said that red was my lucky color.]

{If you don't move the plot, we will.}

[And you won't like how we do it. So get off your @\$\$.]

...*In a minute*, Wade thinks, and goes back to thinking about the direction of hair growth on the back of Petey's hand — thinking it so loudly he can't hear Thing One and Thing Two anymore. It is a perfect moment, dammit, and it's gonna stay that way.

The best day, for Peter, isn't during Chanukah or Christmas or even their very private New Year's party after which he had to revise his definition of "raunchy". It's kicked off by the day in mid-January when Wade brings up the topic of ageplay — shyly, like he's been saving it up, as if any kink he suggests at this point is going to come as some kind of shock to Peter — and no, the best day doesn't happen *because* Wade brings up ageplay.

It's when Wade breaks off mid-rehearsed-speech (Peter's the master of over-rehearsed speeches and knows one when he hears it) to ask "Wait, how old are *you*, anyway? Like for realsy-real?"

"Twenty-four," Peter answers — and then checks himself, because it's *January*, and says, "No wait, twenty-five," and laughs. "Old enough to forget when I have a birthday, apparently."

"Wait whoa what? Your birthday is *when*?"

"All the stalking you've done, I'm surprised you even need to ask. I guess I was still with the, uh..."

"Hangin' out behind Heaven's Gate? On your *birthday*? They took your *birthday* from you?" Peter shrugs, and Wade makes a pterodactyl shriek.

"It's not that big a deal," Peter says. "I haven't gotten excited about a birthday since the eighteenth."

"Not even your twenty-first?"

"Not a big drinker."

"Jesus schmeezus, Petey, there's 'playing it cool' and then there's 'dead on the inside'."

"You have *your* priorities," says Peter with a shrug.

"Oh no no nonono, this won't do and this will not stand." Wade rises, heel-turns, stands at full attention. "I hereby take it upon myself to issue you a *woefully* belated twenty-fifth birthday celebration *so good* it will reconcile you with the concept of *fun* birthdays for the rest of your life."

"Please don't."

"When was your birthday?"

"October 14th."

Wade props the side of his head onto one fist. "So you're a Libra. I could see that. D'you happen to know your moon sign?"

"You don't seriously believe in that stuff, do you?"

“Not really the point. It’s a legitimate part of queer culture, Webs, you gotta get with the program. Be gay, do crime.”

“I’m bi, and a crime *fighter*.”

“Vigilantism is a crime, too.”

“Oh, is that why the cops hate me?”

“Can’t weasel your way out of fate, baby boy.” Wade pulls out his phone, thumbs around the calendar app. “October 14th, so that means... it’ll be three months late this Thursday. Wowie-zowie, that’s a lot to make up for. What’s today, Monday? Oh man, I’ve got some planning to do...” He walks away, still muttering.

“No planning, Wade!”

“Some out-and-out *scheming*!”

“No schemes! Wade? Wade!”

Peter doesn’t see much of him for the rest of the day (and expresses his frustration with that that night by being sort of cursory with the lube), but with a gun to his head he’d confess that it makes his belly kind of warm knowing that Wade’s off somewhere obsessing over how to make him happy for no real reason, just some stupid excuse. Makes his face and ears warm, too, but it’s not like anyone’s around to bear witness to Peter’s embarrassment, so whatever.

He’s also begun to wonder when Wade’s birthday is — and what his sign is, though he’d have no idea how to interpret the information. He doesn’t ask. He’ll find out later, he’s sure. Wade’s as confrontational as possible in his bids for attention.

The off-season birthday celebration ends up lasting Monday through Thursday and every step of the way in between. Wade takes him to the movies, to the zoo, to FAO Schwartz, to the science museum and aquarium.

Thursday, designated ersatz birthday itself, marks the advent of an eight-layer(!) tower of devil’s food cake even bigger than the cake at his cousin’s wedding topped with an entire jar of rainbow sprinkles, twenty-five blood red candles, and a Hulk action figure that Peter knows for a fact Bruce has never seen a cent of royalty for. He has to climb the wall to reach the top and blow out the candles, and does not ask Wade how he got them lit.

“What’d you wish for?” asks Wade. “I hope it’s this.” And he produces a tidy stack of boxes he most likely did not wrap himself.

The first one is a dildo. The second is a glittery butt plug. The third is a matched set featuring velcro hand and leg cuffs, blindfold, ball gag, and unimpressive collar that Peter will definitely be replacing as soon as he has a bunch of money (ha ha). The fourth is what seems to be a really nice, heavy leather flogger. The fifth is a jar of lube. The sixth is another dildo. The seventh is an Instax camera and a few packs of film.

Peter makes use of every last gift before his twenty-four hours of fake birthday are up. In between they eat cake, to keep up their strength or at least their glucose levels, and in the end Peter has a collection of square-shaped photos he’ll never throw away and never show anyone else. On a sneaky whim, he doesn’t even show some of them to Wade, secreting them away and promising to share them when it’s Wade’s birthday.

“I like toys,” Peter decides. “Thank you for helping me make that discovery.”

“Forsooth, ’tis better to give than receive,” Wade says, “especially when I get to be on the receiving end of the presents I give.”

They share a shower (Wade drops to his knees to offer just one more quick go; Peter’s body barely obliges, and Wade laughs and declares that he’s officially made it up to Peter for missing his birthday) and then they share a bowl of popcorn with chili powder and watch *Ponyo*.

“This might sound stupid given how much you’ve come today,” says Peter when the fish-girl is sneaking out of the underwater castle thingy, “but you didn’t have to do any of this.”

“I wanted to,” Wade says immediately. “Orgasms or not. Though they were definitely my top eight moments.”

That, for Peter, is the best day.

Wade isn’t one to stand in the way of keeping a good thing going, and lavishing Petey with presents is *defintiely* a good thing, even when they’re not sexy presents.

Although baby boy *does* look damn sexy in the winter coat Wade gives him, all trim-cut black with a cream-colored sheepskin collar that feels awesome to nuzzle up against.

[Doesn’t hurt that his neck’s right there, either.]

He also looks sexy in the boots even though they aren’t your typically lickable variety, being a bit more practical for a life without a motorcycle. Wade’s plotting how to trick Petey into keeping them on in bed and thinking it’s his own idea.

It *started out* innocent and altruistic — Petey not having any real winter clothes anymore, and those having been subpar to begin with — and Wade should get points for that. He should get *double* points for that. Just because it descends so quickly from there into *here, let me gratify myself by worshipping you with material offerings to enhance your natural glory* shouldn’t negate the karma points he gets for starting out from a totally selfless place.

{Totally?}

[Oh, totally.]

{Nothing to do with those tinglies you get in your jellies from doing it, eh?}

[It’s such a good — feeling — to know you’re alive, it’s such a good — feeling —]

“Leave Mr. Rogers out of this and help me pick out a hat for him so his ears don’t fall off before Valentine’s Day.”

{Think Shortbus’ll make a sugar daddy joke sooner, or make it later?}

“If anyone in this... this, uh... arrangement...”

{Dude, it’s not like your parents are forcing you to get married. The proper nomenclature is “relationship”.}

“Well, if anyone in it is the daddy, it damn well ain’t me.”

[— I think I'll make it a snappy new day —]

Wade snaps his fingers twice, because you don't leave a box-bro hanging like that and you *definitely* don't leave Mr. Rogers hanging, and tosses aside a pile of wool beanies. Good colors, too itchy. "Not that we've had that conversation yet," he adds.

{Whatever you do, DON'T PUSH FOR IT.}

[It's like Cinderella says: if you tell a wish, it won't come true.]

{Has that been our problem this whole time?}

Wade picks up a fur-lined trapper hat.

{Yukon ho.}

[Just get the acrylic one, Shortbus won't care. C'mon, we need gloves too.]

Gloves at least are easy. Wool tweed, fingerless, with the flappy-flap on the back that flips over to turn them into mittens.

{The BEST kind!}

[Get him some fuzzy socks, too. Chicks love fuzzy socks.]

{Shortbus is no chick.}

[%!^@# love fuzzy socks.]

"He's *nobody's* bitch. Not to run the same line twice, but if anyone in this... y'know, this *relationship* is the bitch, I think everyone and their piano tuner knows it's me."

[You said it! The other R-word!]

{So proud. Ugh, why's there never a camera to capture these precious Kodak moments?}

Wade unpockets his phone and snaps an expressionless selfie, because there's *always* a camera, and he's in an accommodating (if slightly fuck-you-I'm-right-and-you're-not) mood. And he grabs a pair of fuzzy socks in absolutely tasteless red and white Where's Waldo stripes.

The store doesn't offer gift wrapping.

Petey loves them anyway.

The deluge of gifts shows no signs of slowing. Peter feels like he should do something before Wade brings him home a beagle that neither of them is responsible enough to take care of. It's not hard to guess, though, that Wade would take it the wrong way if Peter asked him to stop.

That's the thing about Wade, when Wade needs "handling" — you can't realistically hope to stop him. The best you can usually do is to aim him. Peter's known this since their first meeting (when they fought, as most costumed supers do as if by way of introduction).

Peter's never been any good at coming up with wishlists. Throughout the course of the year there must be a million and a half times he sees something he wants, but come the times of year when

Aunt May is asking what he wants for his birthday or Chanukah, he either draws a complete blank, or can only come up with ideas that are way too big and grand (that is to say, expensive) to even think about asking for. Sure, he'd *like* to own his own home but a condo is more of a hopelessly extravagant rich-people wedding gift than something you'd give to congratulate a person on yet another uneventful year of being twenty-something.

But when his stress threshold reaches the point where even an enthusiastic roll in the hay can't overcome the insomnia, he finally gets an idea of what might help, and asks Wade for a watch. Analog, not digital. He doesn't say why.

Wade lights up at being asked for something — Peter makes a mental note: just because it feels like an imposition doesn't mean it is one.

Peter's expecting the watch to light up, too, and to feature a neon-colored plastic band and a licensed character on the face, so he's bemused at first when a few days later Wade presents him with sort of a big jewelry box, pulling it from a pouch on Taco Tuesday and tossing it over his shoulder, over Peter's burrito and into Peter's lap. One more bounce and it'd have fallen off the roof.

"Your wish is my to-do list," says Wade, wadding the bottom of his mask up over his nose and fitting as much taco into his mouth as he possibly can in one go. Usually when he does that it's to stop himself talking. Peter wonders, as always, what else he would've said, and whether it would've made Peter laugh.

The watch is silver and has a dark, bottle-green face with shining roman numerals. The links of the band gleam like new coins. It's not any kind of brand he recognizes but he's still too intimidated to begin to guess how expensive it must've been. Wade's usual taste runs so cheap that sometimes Peter forgets that he's absolutely slap-happy *loaded*.

Loaded and stacked, he thinks — marveling, again, at his uncharacteristically good luck.

The watch looks a bit silly over top of the slender web pattern on his suit's left wrist but he's done worse things to fashion for flimsier reasons. He waits until Wade's swallowed his food before leaning across to kiss and thank him. When Wade opens his mouth it's definitely to say *something*, but he shovels in more taco before his words get a chance.

"Alright," says Peter, "keep your secrets for now."

Wade hums through his food and makes an innocent gesture.

When they come in from patrol and Peter puts the watch back on after his shower, even though there's nothing left to do but go to bed, he doesn't miss Wade giving him a curious eye, but offers nothing. Wade's not the only one who gets to have things he'd rather keep to himself.

Peter turns the watch face to the inside of his wrist and sleeps with his ear resting on top. And sleeps. The ticking is faint and thin and slow, not the mechanical jumble he'd grown accustomed to, but it seems to be enough.

He doesn't like waking up to find indents on the point of his jaw and edge of his cheekbone, though. He doesn't like the idea of being marked by such a thing, even if the visible evidence blessedly doesn't last. He can still feel Wade's eyes lingering there throughout breakfast — in curiosity at first, but as the pattern repeats day after day, the curiosity turns to a concern that Wade won't voice and Peter can't bear.

On Thursday or Friday afternoon Wade wakes up first, makes omelettes and sausage **[Heheh... sausage...]** and decides not to wait to start eating. If the cooking-smells don't bring Petey out of bed, the eating-sounds usually do. And if not, too bad, more for Wade and still hot, too.

Petey makes it to the table when the eggs have gone room temperature but the sausages are still clinging to warmth. The red marks from his watch look particularly brutal today.

[Kinda puts one in mind of that period of time when there was just that big hole in your cheek and your molars were showing, big guy.]

{Which period of time? It's been like that more than once.}

Wade reaches out without thinking *{You do everything without thinking.}* and pokes his fingertips into the indented semicircle in front of Petey's earhole. Petey doesn't flinch, but does push his hand away after a minute. "Why you do this to yourself?" asks Wade. "If you're lookin' for a way to add some texture to your face, lemme be the first to tell ya it ain't all it's cracked up to be and you should *never* do anything to yourself or to anyone else just because *Cosmo* says it'll drive men wild. They have a very liberal definition of 'wild'. You don't want to turn your man into a screaming tasmanian devil or a demented pallas cat. No está bueno, Petey Pie."

"Insomnia," Pete grunts, pouring coffee.

"What, does it give you hives or something? Those don't look like hives."

"No, I get insomnia, always have. I mean it comes and goes. 'S been worse lately." He pauses, adds sugar, adds cream, takes a sip and then another. "The ticking helps me sleep," he adds, lips against the rim of his cup, then washes down the words with a deep swallow.

Wade squints.

[Well SOMETHing about that sure makes him unhappy.]

"That why you've been sleeping on top of the watch?"

Pete makes a sour face. "That's why," he says, in the same tone he might use to say something like *I have gonorrhea and the smell is REALLY getting to me.*

"I'd have gotten you a rubber one if I knew that's what you wanted to do," Wade says. "Sorry for picking the most unforgiving substance known to man instead."

"Don't be. It's gorgeous and I love it. It's useful during the day, too, y'know, for like, the usual reasons a watch is useful."

"So the helping-you-sleep thing is just a bonus."

"No," Petey says, "it's the whole reason I asked for it. Its usefulness as a fashionable timepiece is the bonus."

Wade folds his hands in front of his mouth for a minute or so. *Anything yet?* he thinks.

[Nada.]

{Still a mystery.}

“That’s kinda cute when you think about it,” Wade says, testingly. “Like giving an orphaned kitten an alarm clock in a towel to pretend it’s the mama kitty’s heartbeat.”

“It’s not cute,” says Petey. “It’s freakin’ sad.”

“I mean, yeah, I guess an orphaned kitten would have to be pretty sad…”

“Not the stupid imaginary kitten,” Pete grouses, “I meant *me*.”

“Do I need to cheer you up?” Wade asks, wagging his eyebrows but without much heart.

Petey snorts. “Sad as in pathetic. Like an orphan fucking kitten so fucked up on its own bad experience it can’t even sleep without the ticking clocks anymore.”

Wade doesn’t overlook the plurality of *clocks*, but not even the boxes venture a guess as to its significance. This is probably as close to an answer as they’re going to get today (or possibly ever). “I’m sorry,” he says, backing down.

“Why? You didn’t do anything.”

“‘Sorry’ as in ‘That sucks and I wish you didn’t have to go through that’.” A bit of silence passes, so to fill it Wade adds, “I don’t think you’re pathetic.”

“Nn. Thanks.”

“And I’m glad I could do *something* to help, even if you wish something else would help instead.”

Petey forks the edge of his cold omelette for a minute. “Thanks,” he says again, and conversationally it’s a bit off, but Wade’s never cared about the details so much as long as someone’s talking to him.

Spider-Man wants to patrol alone that night, leaving Wade and the boxes to their own devices. He plays some *Zelda* and spends the rest of the time puzzling over the mysterious case of Petey’s watch.

{Give it a rest, Nancy Drew.}

[Yes please. The Hardy Boys are off the case and about to bust a nut apiece.]

By the time he shuts off the game he’s got an idea.

{A questionable idea.}

It’s not like there’s any harm in it. Wade makes a perfectly serviceable transitional object *if he does say so himself*, and is more than happy to play the role for Petey.

{Isn’t “transitional object” the fancy term for a teddy bear?}

[Wouldn’t it make more sense for him to be YOURS, then?]

“One good turn deserves another,” Wade chirps. “Karma will be my friend for once. I can be patient. If properly motivated.”

{Nothing about this is “proper”.}

“Shush, you. If serving as teddy bear is good enough for Elvis, it’s good enough for me.”

“What’s that?” Petey says, coming out of his post-patrol shower all damp and shirtless and glorious and struggling to pull his pajama pants on.

“Nothing. Shush, you.”

Petey shrugs to himself — further evidence toward Wade’s idea that he’s not the only one around here with internal dialogue — and starts climbing over Wade to get to his side of the bed, the one next to the wall. Wade catches him in his arms and pulls him down on top of himself, clamping Petey’s head to his chest while the rest of Petey wriggles fitfully toward some nominally comfortable position. It ends with him lying half on top of Wade, head still buckled up against Wade’s sternum under the weight of Wade’s arms.

When he raises his watch-hand to his ear, Wade swats it away. Twice.

“Explain?” says Petey, not trying to get away.

Wade grins, for him. Petey can’t see his face, but the motivational-poster crowd says that people can hear it in your voice if you’re smiling. (Years of mask-wearing have yet to prove this point — but then, Wade doesn’t do as much smiling behind the mask as you might think, and anyway he hasn’t been paying attention to this kind of thing so it’s not like he would know offhand.) But he smiles for Petey, and says, “Tick.”

“I have a tick? Where?”

Wade taps his fingers against Petey’s head in a gentle double-rhythm. He can feel his own pulse in his chest, lubdubbing up against Petey’s ear, and taps in time with it. “Tick,” he says. “Tick. Tick. Tick.”

Petey wraps a shy arm around Wade’s ribs, and maybe it’s just fatigue from the night’s patrol, or maybe it’s something softer, but he’s asleep in a few seconds... and still there, untossed and unturned, when Wade wakes up the next afternoon.

And the next night when Petey crawls in from patrol and strips himself of Spider-Man, he goes from the shower straight to bed, not bothering to put the watch back on, dragging Wade off the couch to the bed and shoving him flat onto his back before spreadeagling over him and making himself a pillow of Wade’s chest, an extra blanket of Wade’s arm.

Damn. Baby boy knows what he wants, thinks Wade as Petey shuts his eyes with a sigh.

{Obviously delusional.}

[Sacrilege! Shun the nonbeliever!]

Water from Petey’s hair curves a tickly trail to Wade’s collarbone. “Guess I have a bedtime now?” Wade says.

“Shush,” Petey mumbles, reaching a finger toward Wade’s lips, missing, and nearly picking his nose instead. “Less talking, more ticking.”

“Yeesh. As you wish.”

{Now this is an interesting development...}

[Our theory just gained more evidence!]

Save your theories for the morning, Wade thinks, viciously. I get one more night of fluff before you try to bring back the angst.

There's nothing in response, which is the best response Wade could've wished for.

He's alone in the kitchen, making waffles on the waffle iron Petey found new-in-dusty-box in one of the neighboring warehouses. The hiss and pop of batter punctuate Wade's solitude, a few measured moments alone while Petey patrols. (Not that there's much to patrol out here, but he's been trying to get back into the habit.)

{You know he's getting clingy when it's a relief to get away from him for ten minutes.}

Ah well, the quiet never lasts. "No one's 'getting away' from anyone," Wade says. "You think I'd be makin' waffles if it was just me? Nope indeedy. Only reason I get waffles is 'cause he's around to make 'em for."

[And because he's the one who found the iron.]

He lifts the top plate. The batter ran thin in one corner; there's a gap in the waffle like the negative space of a puzzle piece. Wade picks the fluffy thing off of the black iron and bites into it, measuring out the batter for the next one more carefully.

{You think it's odd that he kept you pinned all night and didn't even TRY to ravish you?}

"I do not."

[As horny as he's been lately, though?]

"Everyone needs a break sometimes."

{Especially from touching you.}

Wade smiles, unhappily. "I walked right into that one."

{You did, yes. You feeling alright, big guy?}

Batter starts running over the edges of the iron. Wade just lets it go; it's too late to stop it now. Measure less next time. But at least he knows this waffle won't have gaps in it.

[Do you wish he'd ravished you again instead?]

"That's not a fair question. If I say yes, that makes me still just as thirsty and pathetic as I was when he was in a cultish way. If I say no, that paints him as such a slut that even I look forward to a night off."

{Things can be more than one thing.}

[Is it weird that he's so ready to use you? As a replacement watch-slash-sleep-aid, or...]

Wade narrows his eyes at the wall. "Finish the sentence," he says.

{He's not going to finish the sentence.}

[Not when you say it like THAT.]

{It's just odd. Last night was odd.}

“Well I for one think it's as sweet as a hand-knit hat on a hairless kitten,” Wade says, quietly.

He swaps out the overflowed waffle for a new cup of batter.

[Attracted to strong-but-damaged people, are we?]

“Well they're just so gosh darn *relatable*.”

{But is Shortbus?}

“Is he what, relatable? How else would we be having *relations*?”

{No, is he into badass woobies?}

[Jerkass woobies.]

“I'm not a woobie!”

[You kinda are, though.]

{But wasn't Shortbus' type more leggy and hypercompetent before?}

“Before what?”

{Exactly.}

“No joke, bro. Before what?”

He waits for an answer, then thwacks his head with the heel of his hand. “Is this thing on? Hello? Before what?”

If they don't say anything after he repeats himself three times, they're not gonna say anything at all. He's never figured out why they do it, but it tends to leave him with the last thing he said echoing down through his grey matter like a pop ballad stuck in his head — oh wait, maybe that's why they do it.

Before what?

{He's using you, you know.}

“What, for sex? Thrilled to be of service.”

{That's... not what we mean.}

They don't elaborate.

Before what?

[Waffle's burning.]

The next few minutes are cozy silence and cozy kitchen-noises, at least externally. His thoughts swarm like kicked-nest hornets. Wade marvels that his head can be so noisy even without the boxes' help.

“LeFou, I’m afraid I’ve been thinking...”

[A dangerous pastime.]

“I know.”

[What’s on your mind, big guy?]

{Besides us.}

[And HIM... and his HANDS...]

“It *is* him and—“

{AGAIN?}

“—and you’ll deal with it and be happy. I need a second and maybe third opinion at *least* and Domino hasn’t answered *one* text. You think she blocked my number?”

{Dunno. You think your ex-wife keeps a shriveled set of your severed testicles dangling from her rearview mirror as a trophy?}

[Which ex-wife? Or “wife”, as Priscilla prefers?]

“The answer to your first question is *shaddap*. For real and for serious now. Baby boy seem, I dunno... different lately?”

{Why Mr. Wilson wherever could you have gotten such an outlandish notion. It staggers the mind.}

“...But you’re my mind.”

{STAGGERS.}

[He seems hornier.]

{Definitely hornier.}

[Yeah, mostly just horny.]

“So I’m not making it up. Okay. Good. Or, not *good-good*, but good.”

If only that were the end of the conversation.

{Nothing wrong with that of course, he’s at that age—}

[Is he? Thought he was older...]

{Still close enough to college age and he never got it out of his system before. Perfectly natural.}

[Oh, perfectly.]

{Unless of course it’s not.}

[Oh, definitely not.]

{He’s WAY hornier than before.}

[SUSPICIOUSLY hornier than before.]

Wade can almost feel them turn to look at him, though they don't have eyes and they're inside his head so, by definition, are always turned toward him no matter what. He can sense the gesture anyway. It's uncanny.

He sighs. "Before what?" he asks, miserably.

{Well of course, not to look a gift twink in the mouth—}

[Oh, he's good with his mouth.]

{Little TOO good? For someone with supposedly little to no prior experience.}

[Enthusiasm can make up for a lot.]

{Not THAT much. Looks like Shortbus is a savant after all.}

"He'd hate us if he could've heard that sentence you just said."

[He wouldn't hate us. He CAN'T. Not right now. He can't afford to.]

Wade wants to argue that most people seem to find it actually really very easy to hate him, but somehow he knows the argument won't hold water this time. Call it a sixth sense but he knows damn well by now when he does or doesn't stand a chance against box logic, even before it starts.

{Just wondering about the timing of all this.}

[The way he's flipped so hard on his previous touch response. Almost like an act of desperation.]

{Think about the timing of it.}

"Time is fake," Wade says.

[YOU'RE fake.]

"Nothin' this pretty could be real, sweetums."

{When did it start?}

"You know damn well when it started. So by all *means* feel free to enlighten me as to your crazy-person conspiracy. Monologue away. 'S not like I can get up and walk out of the theater." He waves the ladle around the kitchen and at the empty shithole beyond. This place feels as gaping and gross as Goatse when Petey's gone out to "take his exercise", as he has (adorably) come to call his Spider-Man patrols lately.

[Hm... To take his exercise, or to take a break from you?]

"Hey now. I'm pretty sure he almost definitely maybe sort of really likes me, possibly, your-mileage-may-vary."

[...and why wouldn't he, when you're so confident in the relationship.]

"I'm just tryin' not to put words in his mouth. He hates that."

{Hasn't stopped you putting other things in his mouth.}

“He *loves* that,” says Wade, with full conviction. Petey’s *said* so, enthusiastically, four times so far and yes Wade’s been counting. He’s been counting and keeping track of a lot of Petey-things lately, a whole mental notebook of tallies — is autism sexually transmissible? Wait’ll the anti-vaxxers catch wind. “Anyway, if I don’t get to put words in his mouth, *you* definitely don’t.”

{Who’s trying? We’re just trying to get you to put two and two together. No mouths involved.}

[Denial ain’t a river in Egypt, big guy.]

{Makes sense that you’d be in it, though. All that energy that used to go into stalking Shortbus has to go SOMEwhere now, and it’s not like you’ve been in the mood to take jobs lately.}

“What, and leave him for days or weeks on end? He’s a flight risk!”

{Only once he’s found a more suitable replacement for the services you’ve been providing.}

Wade grins. “I do love to provide service.”

{Not as much as you love being able to fool yourself into believing someone finds your mouth to be pleasant company and not just conveniently available and willing.}

[And not just in a dirty way, either. Although also in a dirty way.]

Wade doesn’t like where this seems to be going. “I don’t like where this seems to be going,” he says.

{You wouldn’t say that unless you already knew where this is going.}

[And you wouldn’t know unless you were already thinking the same thing as we are.]

{You can’t hide what’s in your head from us. Where do you think we are?}

[Yeah, where DO you think we are? Reality check!]

“You, specifically, are in the meatball I call a head. As for where *that* is... home. We’re home. This is home.”

[This cavernous Goatse of a place?]

He pauses. “Okay well at least it’s the place he *calls* home when he’s here in it, with me.”

[With us.]

“With *me*, and *you* don’t get to claim that honor until *you*’ve been invited to your knees for him.”

{With US.}

[Not that he knows. He’ll never know. He never can. You’re alone with us. Worse, we’re alone with YOU.]

{You’re not the only one who can’t die.}

“This isn’t how I wanted today to go,” says Wade, but not to them. Not to himself, either, not really. To the readers, then.

{The readers. Another part of your world he'll never understand. He WOULDN'T understand, even if he COULD.}

[And who can blame him.]

“...He goes along with it,” says Wade, “when I make reference.”

Blessed reference. Their shared language, even when the source material is unknown to one or the other. Somehow the conversation still flows. He's so *perfect*.

{He's BROKEN.}

Wade slams his fists on the counter and leaves them there. “Don't you *dare*.”

[But he IS broken.]

{And his chief symptom is YOU.}

Wade bangs the ladle against his head as hard as he can, over and over, like ringing a dinner bell, until his ears are actually ringing. He blinks dizzily at the ladle. There's hair on it. Where the hell did *hair* come from?! He throws it in the sink. No more waffles today.

{You're his self-medication. Don't you get it, you @\$\$hat?}

[Most people's kneejerk to sex with a rotten blood pudding like you would be to go numb and dead inside.]

“Your mom begs to differ,” says Wade. He's staring at the wall; he can smell the last waffle starting to burn.

[That's all he's after.]

“If that's true, he's got a funny way of showing it. He ain't faking those orgasms, fellas. ...Though if he is faking 'em, I've rented some guys who'd pay good money to learn that trick.”

{The orgasms are the drug. Think for a minute, big guy. Sure it hurts to use that muscle, but you really need to THINK.}

“Where's thinking ever gotten me?” He knows this mood that's crept up on him. If he starts thinking, he won't be able to stop until his wind-up toy of a brain has rolled down a flight of stairs.

The boxes lean into him, an almost physical pressure.

[Waffle's burning.]

Wade lifts the handle of the iron and releases a plume of charcoal-scented smoke. Good thing he doesn't use fire alarms or this might *really* suck. He unplugs the iron. Even if he rinsed the hair off the ladle, he won't have the focus to get any more edible ones out of this session, not with the boxes in this kind of mood.

{Consider the timing.}

[It's a simple request.]

{When did Shortbus start wanting to touch you?}

It was right after he got blown up and kidnapped by Earth's Douchiest, but Wade won't be the first to say so. "His name isn't Shortbus," he says instead. "It's baby boy."

{And when did he start being DTF?}

It was right after spending half the summer homeless and joining a cult and being dosed and sent on a suicide mission and being in a huge melee involving children and police and getting just about blown up again — **[Because there's nothing trauma-inducing there, right?]** — but Wade won't be the first to say so.

"He was busy," he says instead. "Work comes first. It always does with these hero-types."

{Oh, don't be obtuse.}

[Don't act like you haven't had this line of thought before. It's gauche.]

{Agreed. Don't act like this suspicion hasn't been HAUNTING you.}

[Your sleeplessness has been cutting into our mommy-and-daddy time. It's getting irksome.]

{Your time in the denial stage is up, sweetheart. This song's as played out as "All Star".}

The problem is, if he agrees with them, then he has to decide what (if anything) to do about it, and the honorable thing will almost definitely suck real, real bad.

He'd be Petey's therapist if he knew how, or would rent Petey a therapist if Wade didn't have the blinding urge to shoot all mental healthcare professionals on sight. He'd get Bob Ross to take Petey on as his totally chill protégé if Bob Ross were still alive, or get Mr. Rogers to talk to Petey if Mr. Rogers were still alive, or hire Freddie Mercury to serenade Petey's troubles away if Freddie Mercury were still alive, or buy a magical healing spell for him from David Bowie if David Bowie were still alive and also a wizard, and dammit why are all the heroes either dead or backhanded ivory-tower traitors?

{Or just as broken as he is?}

"Shaddap. I don't need your help."

[You need all the help you can get. Whether you DESERVE any help is another thing, but—]

"You are the least supportive intrusive hallucination *ever*."

[Words hurt, big guy.]

{So what're you gonna do?}

Do? "Do? Who said anything about doing? Petey's a big boy—"

{Baby boy. Baby.}

"—and if he wants to numb out the past year of trauma with sex or whatever, better he does it by practicing how to give good orders and accepting my worship of his cock than by drinking, shooting up, or shooting people."

[Right. Because your motives are TOTALLY selfless. Y'know, you're a real humanitarian.]

{You really weren't kidding when you told him that you're greedy.}

[Heehee — greedy for Petey.]

{Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.}

[Now big guy ain't the only one who's circlin' the asylum.]

{If you loved him you'd at least MENTION therapy.}

[And offer to pay for it!]

{And offer to pay for it. They wouldn't lock him up for this. They wouldn't treat him like you.}

“You don't know that. You can't know that. The autism might tip the scales against him there.”

[You're not greedy — you're selfish.]

{That's so much worse.}

“You're so *judgy*! Why are you two always so *judgy*?”

[Dude, that's like, literally our job.]

“Says who? You don't *have* to do something just because the guidance counselor says it's a good idea. It's your life, not hers. And how is she qualified to give out career advice anyway when her career is *guidance counselor*.”

[Look, big guy, just because your life is a gaping empty Goatse hole anytime he steps out the door doesn't mean you get to enable his dependency problem.]

“Quit exaggerating. He wouldn't keep coming back for more if it wasn't helping him out somehow. I don't need you to tell me I'm nowhere near as good as heroin.”

{Now THERE'S a drug.}

“So what if I'm getting something out of it too? That's not selfish, it's a perk. It'd be *selfish* to put the kibosh on it just because sending him to therapy looks better on paper than sexing him up. It'd be putting my judgment ahead of his about what's good for him and we *know* he hates that. He hates it *so much*.”

{Not as much as he's gonna hate himself when he comes to his senses.}

Wade scoffs. “That doesn't even sound real. *That's* how sure I am of how much he means it when he says he l—”

[Bluster.]

{If you were all that confident, we wouldn't even bother arguing.}

“Not to mention,” Wade presses, pointedly ignoring them, “how much of an ass it'd make me to deny Petey *anything* he asks for — which, let's be real, I dunno that I *could*—”

{Another problem that'll only end in tears, but carry on.}

“I don't remember asking you for relationship advice.”

[But you did, back at the beginning of this discussion.]

“Did not.”

[Did too.]

{Once you invite us in, we're staying a while.}

[Like vampires! *hssss*]

{Like cops.}

“Whatever. Even if I chose to believe you, whaddaya want me to do, eh? I can't just take something away from him that he's *chosen* and that *helps him* just because it *looks bad* or... you know, doesn't mean what I want it to mean. That'd be selfish *and* girly—“

[Misogynist!]

“Gesundheit. I mean I'm greedy, but I ain't *that* kind of greedy. I mean I may be greedy but I'm not bossy and I'm *definitely* not snobby.”

{Well, choosy.}

[Snobby!]

“Snobby. Judgy. Like you, Judgy McJudgeFaces.”

[We don't have faces.]

{When you're right, you're right. You can't afford to use your judgment. Considering what you'd be losing if you let go... of the thing that's up for judging.}

[Of this.]

There's a pause.

A lengthy one. Wade could crack eggs against the edge of the silence.

“Go ahead,” says Wade, eventually. “Keep waiting for me to deny it.”

The silence stretches out to fill the whole empty, dead-feeling space, at once damning and self-righteous. Wade remembers the nightmares he used to have, before he knew Petey, of Spider-Man saying horrible things to him just for trying to be a better man. Dream-Spidey's voice sounded nothing like Petey's, not his normal speaking voice or the awkward way he deepens it when he's in costume. But it felt a lot like this silence.

Sure, it's taking a while to really get the men regrouped, but it can't be helped when Drew's taking such a long time to really regroup himself. His certainty that he could handle anything whether he could anticipate it or not proved to be just a conceit when Iron Man and Spider-Man made the scene.

Not that Drew blames himself for getting thrown off by *that*. The only part that's justifiably his fault, really, was having the conceit to begin with. Pride goes before a fall, and he should've known

better. One of his own protection commanders has L-I-F-E tattooed across his knuckles because (as he said) “That’s what really hits you and ain’t no AP course can prepare you for *that* sucker punch.” (And he would know; he was a high school history teacher before that career went toiletward — due to certain unnameable videos allegedly found on his work PC if you believe the scuttlebug, and Drew doesn’t put any weight to scuttlebug, no weight at all. If he did there’d be no one left to work for him. Everyone’s got a story, alleged or otherwise. No one comes to him by accident.)

And who *wouldn’t* get thrown off for a while if *suddenly: supers!*

Well, besides Keith. Keith wouldn’t be budged. But Drew hasn’t seen so much as Keith’s shadow since the night it all went down and he can’t make up his mind whether Keith stayed to feed himself to his own kaboom-booms, or only stayed long enough to make it *look* like he did. Either way he hasn’t shown up at rendezvous or elsewhere, which for all intents and purposes makes him dead to Drew, and Drew’s got no choice, no choice at all, but to respect that. Keith was a dependable and loyal man and has earned the right to fake his death if that’s what he really wants.

Besides which, Drew’s got no alternative to respecting it, since he can’t *find* the creepy ass. Not even Nicholas knows what became of Keith. Worse, Keith’s not the only one who’s vanished, not by a longshot. The whole Brotherhood, it seems, is in the wind, and Drew’s only tracked down a handful of officers so far. Half of the ones he’s found are keeping a low profile Drew feels compelled to respect. The other half are awaiting sentencing.

Rebuilding seems unlikely. Not in New York, anyway, and definitely not without more of his officers.

Oh, it chafes him.

The bigger bug up his butt, though — bigger than questions of the oh-so-uncertain future — is how the details of it are sitting wrong, all wrong.

There’s the big things, like how Iron Man was the one who caught the media’s attention, but how scattershot reports from the men Drew’s talked to — some of them from the upper floors — pieced together to confirm that the Spider-Man was on the scene first. Iron Man is *fast*, can show up in a flash. He was there second, and maybe even as second banana; Drew will shave his beard off if he’s wrong.

And he doesn’t read the tabloids but even Drew knows that it goes against superhero social politics for a major international player like Iron Man to play second string to a spandex-wrapped purse-snatcher catcher whose superpower schtick seems to be some kind of specialized rope bondage. (They’re all perverts anyway. The masks are just colorful gimp hoods. Drew only spent about a minute and a half with the Navy but sometimes you can just *tell*.)

And there’s the niggling little things, like how did the Spider-Man show up so far outside of Manhattan, so soon after the cops did? (He *knows* the cops don’t work with him.) And how did he get inside the building?

And among a crowd of guys and general chaos, how did the Spider-Man know to chase after *him* — if that’s in fact what he was doing. Sure seemed like it when Drew slipped down and out. Sure seemed like it when the Spider *followed him outside* even though the action inside hadn’t stopped yet. Could’ve been luck led him there, or close observation the way a lion reads a stampede of zebras to find the one he wants to single out.

But even if the Spider read the crowd like that and fixed on Drew, that he tailed him so close

behind still leans a little too conveniently on luck. Drew's good at vanishing in a crowd, if he does say so himself.

And then there's the nagging little thing that has the feel of a bigger thing, much bigger: why was the Spider, mask notwithstanding, wearing normal clothes?

Sure, he's a mask over jeans-and-a-sweatshirt on the news sometimes, but — and here Drew got himself on a library computer and wasted an entire Thursday obsessively scouring the backlogs of both the *Times* and the *Bugle* — where the Spider appears in plainclothes, it seems to always be near crowds or population centers, places a real person could conceivably just *happen to be* when the turd hit the fan. And the House of the Brotherhood is — was — relatively isolated from such places. Intentionally. Very intentionally.

It all only adds up if you're not paying careful attention. The papers only cared about Iron Man dismantling a so-called "cult", and the police only cared about having someone to lock up for all the recent bombings. But Drew cares more deeply than any of them. There's *something* going on — or having *gone* on, whatever the grammar — and Drew aims to drag it by the ear out into the blessed light of day.

This is why it takes so long to get up out of bed these days. His gears just won't quit their grinding.

That, and getting up is a tremendously uncomfortable affair now.

There's heavy frost on the van's glass. He braces himself and crawls out of the sleeping bag, rolls it up tidily and wedges it under the front seat. He starts the motor — it shudders — and gets dressed in the privacy of the cargo area while the engine warms itself up and sets to work defrosting the windows. The air is damp with his breath and that makes it feel all the colder.

Hopefully this man from protection crew... whosit (he checks his notes), Lenny... hopefully Lenny can provide some filler for all the holes in what's clearly some kind of plot.

He'd better. He's the only man from protection Drew's been able to track down since the night it all went tits-up, and he doesn't hold out much hope for finding anyone else. The fact is Drew doesn't have much left to count as blessings aside from his own freedom, and he's putting that at one hell of a risk to talk to Lenny. Even with the outrageously expensive prosthetics on his ears, nose, and forehead, and the spray-on hair color, and the powder blue "Florida retiree" windbreaker-sweatpants-and-Keds getup he's putting on (entirely inadequate for the New England cold), Drew still feels as identifiable as Hester Prynne at Sunday services.

Once the vents are coughing out lukewarm air and have blasted a peephole through the frost on the windshield, he backs the van out of the alley and follows his phone's GPS to the county lockup. He feels naked without any backup, in the form of plans or manpower. (The thin clothes don't help him feel any more protected.) He checks the edges of the prosthetics one more time in the rearview.

He resists the urge to fidget as he makes his way to see his "nephew", tottling along through the checkpoints with a composition book and blue-ink Bic stuffed into one armpit.

Lenny, as chance would have it, was among those who confronted Mikey at the car place the night it all happened and, according to Justin, is holding onto certain intelligence he's only willing to share with management. For which there is no precedent — to Drew's knowledge, it's never occurred to anyone to *dare* — so he's really playing this by ear. Luckily he's a deft hand at carrying an unexpected tune.

This is cutting it fine, though. As he sits down across from a hunched mass of lean muscle, he's still undecided whether he's here as management or as a closer representative.

Lenny's eyes are shifty and easily startled. The sleepless dark circles under them look almost like wounds.

Best not to risk his trust.

"I'd like to speak to the management," says Lenny, under his breath. The words barely make it past his chest.

"Speaking," says Drew.

Watching Lenny's reaction is fascinating. For all the years Drew's been playing management, this is the first time he's ever interacted with someone directly from within that role. It's almost a taste of celebrity, but a small one, a Costco sample, restricted by the surroundings and by the slightly pathetic disguise Drew's chosen. He remembers the scene in *Willy Wonka* when Gene Wilder first appears and the crowd falls hush and uncertain at the non-spectacle of his ersatz limp.

"Sir," Lenny says after a moment, "it's imperative that you know what happened the night above the car lot."

"I know every last one of you either vanished or ended up in lockup or the E.R. under armed guard," says Drew. "I know the kid got away. So I know he wasn't alone."

Lenny physically flinches at the reprimand. But he gathers himself and leans forward, whispers the next part: "*Iron Man* was there."

Drew's brows climb. The latex pasted to his forehead itches.

"But it's not like he just *happened* to be there. He *talked* to the kid... they *knew* each other. Kid called him 'Tony'. As in Tony Stark? How does a kid like that get on a first-name basis with Iron Man?"

Drew breathes out through his nose, slowly. His ire rises in time with his hope sinking. His network is well and truly scattered, if this is the first he's hearing about this. His network is scattered, and Justin needs to do a better job teaching his men to use their dang comms.

"He didn't recognize the kid at first, though," Lenny continues. "If the kid's linked to Iron Man or the Avengers, it may be anonymously. I think... I think he might be a super."

Drew gives that notion one *mighty* side-eye, and isn't putting on airs. "Now that's a funny thought," he says. "I don't think for one hot second that it's pure gossip mill that they're all backasswards weirdos and twisted one way or the next. But you're stretching my imagination into an uncomfortable shape if you want me to believe that some retarded teenager is a literal masked vigilante with the same affiliation as *the* Captain America."

"With all due respect, I didn't say he *was* an Avenger, sir. There are other supers. There are other super *groups*. It's not impossible."

Drew's mind flits back to the Spider-Man again, and it fouls his mood.

"He did a helluva job evading us," says Lenny. "And holding us off until the Iron Man showed up. Considering how the odds were weighted, frankly sir, personally, I think the chances he *doesn't* have something else going on with him are slim to none."

“You’re kidding me with this horsehockey.” But Drew says it to the side wall, not to Lenny, and leans back in his seat as he does. He scrubs his mustache side to side with his first two fingers. “Alright, so let’s say we play your game.”

“I’m not playing around. Sir.”

“Okay fine, let’s say I *humor* you for a minute here. Hazard a guess. Who would *you* say we were dealing with?”

A shrug.

“I asked you a question.”

“And I don’t have an answer,” says Lenny. “I don’t collect super trading cards. Nobody particularly springs to mind. Maybe he’s a mutie?”

“Well, Lord knows there’s enough of ‘em,” Drew admits. “Lord knows...”

“They don’t usually mix with the more... celebrity types, though.”

“That you know of.”

“Could be an Inhuman, too. Anyway I can tell you he’s fast and a good climber. Like, parkour video climbing.”

Drew waves that detail away. “He was hopped up on more amphetamines than a commercial airline pilot. He could’ve pole-vaulted the Grand Canyon.”

“Good aim, too.”

“We already knew he had excellent hand-eye coordination. That’s not news.”

Another minute or so ticks by. Lenny shifts, restless. Drew wonders how much time they allow per visit. Not like he has much experience with these kinds of places, knock wood.

“Do you think any of this might be helpful? Sir?”

Drew blinks, returns to the moment, returns to his role. “The Iron Man getting involved that early on is news, yes, and it’s no small news, nothing small about it at all. I just doubt it means what you think it does. Still valuable information, Lenny, thank you very much for bringing it to my attention. — Though next time, please be so kind as to go through the *proper* channels.”

“Of. Of course sir. Yes sir. Thank you sir.”

Drew rises, zips up his ridiculous old-man windbreaker, and leaves without another word.

He pulls the van off at a small municipal park and gets out, gets walking. It’s easier to do math in his head when he’s pacing, and it’s easier to pace in one big long line than back and forth like a big cat in a zoo, mindless with walls.

Addition is the easiest math to do.

So Mikey, the Little Retard Who Could, is on a first-name basis with one of the most well-known and (famously) least accessible Avengers. Which could be a happy coincidence. The Iron Man could’ve met him for an inspiration-porn publicity op and the kid could’ve taken that to mean friendship. They can’t really be *that* close if Mikey ended up sleeping rough and finally in radius of

the Brotherhood.

...Except that wasn't entirely an accident, though, was it? Mikey's notebook is proof of that much.

Say it's true, say Mikey knows at least one Avenger. That accounts for the Iron Man making not one but two meddlesome appearances in Drew's business on the same disastrous night, whatever the nature of their connection and however it came about.

Add: Mikey had some inkling of what he was doing when Drew found him — or — when he found Drew?

Add: The kid can fight, or at least evade an entire trained militia troop and give them a run and a half for their money. Is fast. Can climb.

Add: Is also the type of person to rig a storage unit to blow when it's filled with (presumably) his own personal belongings and possibly who knows what else. There's no mystery where Mikey learned to build a bomb, but Keith wouldn't have taught him the infrastructure needed to set them up as booby traps, and Nicholas wouldn't have taught him to make fireworks.

Fireworks can be bought easily enough, if you go out of state. He's not sure when Mikey would've had the time, or the bus ticket money, but the traps could've been set ages ago under any kind of circumstance, any kind at all.

And *why* set fireworks? Poor man's alarm system, maybe? (Not *that* poor...) It's not pyromania — Keith would've definitely noticed such inclinations in him at some point, and would've definitely reported it.

But in order for fireworks to be an effective alarm, you'd have to have a clear line of sight, or at least be within earshot. Or at least, you'd have to *expect* to be there, which makes more sense if he rigged it long before coming to Drew.

Drew smiles. Of course. There's his radius. How did he not think of this before? (Too busy gear-grinding and trying to find safe places to park for the night.)

The smile sinks as quickly as it appeared. The math supports Lenny's theory more than Drew's skepticism debunks it, at least so far.

Subtract: The police were ultimately the ones who tossed the House. Not really known for playing nice with vigilantes, super or otherwise.

Subtract: Mikey's age. His... *condition*. His nervous personality.

(All of which could potentially be faked, except his age, which could potentially be mistaken...? Drew doesn't think he's mistaken, though. He's a people person. He'd be able to tell.)

He blows into his fists to warm them and thinks about the storage unit again, though he'd rather not. Something about it is crossing his grain, even moreso than the fresh news of the Avengers link. He can't tell what, though, just *something*. Something he's overlooked.

He backtracks. Explosion, fireworks. Booby trap. Storage unit. Storage unit key —

Drew stops cold. Does a 180 and hotfoots it back to the van. He throws open the side door and drags toward him the lidless cardboard box he salvaged from his own personal storage spot after everything went sideways. He pulls out Mikey's limp duffle and roots through it until he finds the key sitting in a fold of nylon fabric. He wouldn't dare think it, he wouldn't *dare*, without the proof

in his hand, but here it is, the innocent little plastic Spider-Man dangling off the end of the U-Store key.

How did the Spider-Man get in the building? Why did the Spider-Man come after Drew specifically? Why was he in plainclothes as if he'd just... already been there...? How does Mikey know the Iron Man?

The equation suddenly adds up: *Mikey is Spider-Man*.

...No.

"Actually, yes," says Drew to himself. He glances behind him and around to be sure he's alone, not that it makes a difference either way. "Yes and you know it." The only reason not to believe it is just... disbelief.

And that's how Drew finds himself facing a decision he never expected: what, if anything, to do about the Spider-Man.

Iron Man he'd never consider gunning for; someone that big is just untouchable for someone in Drew's league. Besides which, the Iron Man was just a side player in this game. It was the Spider-Man — it was *Mikey* — who Drew invited into his *home*, and fed and sheltered, who took a 47-B prototype and literally ran with it, who chased Drew through the basement of his own home like a stubborn cat after a cockroach — after everything Drew did for him!

That demands retaliation.

(And anyway, if Lenny's right about him having some kind of relationship with the Iron Man, professional or otherwise, then dealing with Spider-Man somehow would have an effect on the untouchable Iron Man too, as a bonus.)

Admittedly, he might not be so tempted if he didn't already have a radius to work with, assuming Mikey didn't abandon the area once his little trap was sprung.

Plus if he doesn't do something, that's at least two supers out there who've come down hard on the side against him, and his (admitted) mild paranoia doesn't appreciate that, especially when one of them has been *in* the Brotherhood.

There *are* no former members, after all.

"*Were* none," he says to himself, and slams the door shut in a fit of temper. Now every man and child left alive could be called as much, whether they'd left willingly or not. There's simply nothing left for them to be a part of.

And *that*, Drew decides as he settles back into the driver's seat, is what he simply *cannot* let stand.

Petey starts getting back into more regular patrolling again. He's *shinier* when he's an active Spider-Man, so Wade only complains about how dead the place feels without him when Petey's already complaining about how much farther his patrol commute is from here compared to his old apartment.

The bozos in Wade's brain quiet down for a while, save the usual idle peanut-gallery commentary. If Wade were a glass-half-full type, he might think it's because they're content with their dirty work for the time being and see no reason to actively punish him for existing.

But he's *not* a glass-half-full type. He's a glass-empty-dry-broken-and-scattered type, so in his heart of hearts he's sure the boxes are spending every quiet background moment — when Wade's preoccupied sexing Petey up or showering him with cozier forms of attention — conferring with each other over their next move.

Wade carries on and does his best to pretend he's not waiting for it.

He's eating breakfast next to baby boy — actual breakfast at actual breakfast-time, what the doodle — cheap sausage for the cheap jokes, french toast with fancy hipster-kneaded bread and powdered sugar and cinnamon, and lots of maple that was tapped by actual beavers wearing plaid (or actual lesbians) if the label logo is to be believed. Wowzers, does Wade get secondhand pampered whenever he's wooing someone else.

[Isn't that like half the reason why you woo so enthusiastically?]

{More aggressively than enthusiastically. The other half of the reason being, of course, sheer sweaty desperation for the other person to stay and play nice.}

[Not even to play nice. Just to stay.]

Ha... ha, Wade thinks as dryly as he can.

[We weren't trying to be funny. You'll know when we're trying to be funny.]

{'Twould be a delight to point out your flaws were the job not so tediously interminable.}

“‘Twould’?” Wade says out loud.

Petey ignores him. He's really developing a sharp instinct for when Wade is or isn't talking to him. It's impressive. Usually it takes people at least a couple years of intensive immersion training to reach this level of proficiency.

[He HAS had years. You've been chasing him for a WHILE, dude.]

Chasing is one thing. It was only like seven months ago Petey called them friends for the first time.

{And how many burritos-with-guac did that cost ya?}

And he was having such a lovely meal, too. Wade considers forking himself in the brain. Literally jabbing a fork in it, not “forking” as in “holy motherforking shirtballs”. Wade would absolutely not fuck a brain, his own or anyone else's.

[Not outside of a *Deadpool Kills* title, anyway.]

{Oh, ew.}

Without mechanical assistance the only options for forking his brain are through the eye or the ear — he doesn't think he could get it deep enough through his nose — and either one would ruin Petey's appetite for breakfast. He abandons the urge.

[Ohhh, see, so now he's got you all... um...]

{Don't strain anything.}

[...all like, taking care of your nutritional intake and refraining from self-harm, woo, uh-

oh...]

{Dude, don't start something you don't know how to finish. It makes us both look bad.}

[Like some kinda... responsible... adult person... in a stable relationship or something...]

{Please just. Stop trying.}

[*whip-cracking noise*]

{That joke doesn't work in a text-based medium.}

“And it stopped being funny in the ‘80s,” Wade says. (Petey glances at him to check; Wade keeps his gaze on the plate and Petey goes back to eating.)

{A lot of things did. Comedy really struggles when the average jackoff can take shoulder pads seriously.}

[The cocaine helped, though.]

{It helped Robin Williams. Other than that...?}

[How dare you attribute a great natural talent like Robin Williams to the use of incredibly harmful illicit drugs!]

{How dare you attribute the results of all his hard work to something as banal and arguably nonexistent as “natural talent”?}

“How dare *you* insult his memory by invoking his name during an argument that’s transparently the shoulder pad of wordcount dialogue?”

Petey snrks and chokes on his coffee.

“Sorry baby,” says Wade. “They’re *chatty* little dingbat-machines today.” He gets up and starts picking up dishes to cart to the sink.

*{#@^& you, this is going be the highlight of your *&@^\$# chapter.}*

“You guys know it *physically hurts* when you do that, right?!”

[\$#^*& \$##& and \$&#, son, that’s half the !@#(& #@*& point you @##& \$##&*(@ wife of an @&^#*&.]

{You love the pain because you know you deserve it.}

Wade makes a *wehh* sound and buries his forehead behind Petey’s shoulder. Petey reaches around with an awkwardly angled arm and pat-pats Wade behind the ear.

“How about some Disney?” Petey suggests.

Wade mumbles what he hopes sounds like assent. (Petey’s been getting really good at deciphering Wade’s variously verbal indications of consent, too. Clever girl.)

After Petey moved in — damn, that still feels weird to say, or think, even though it’s true, maybe because Petey didn’t have any *stuff* to bring so there wasn’t an official-feeling Moving Day...

Anyway, after he moved in Wade got Disney+, and now Petey clicks to it and puts on *The Rescuers Down Under*.

The boxes seem to be paying closer attention to the movie than Wade is. He rests his head on Petey's shoulder, and it does feel like *rest*, even though due to their height differential he has to bend himself into the shape of a question mark to do it.

After a while Petey's bouncing shakes Wade's head off its perch and sends him sinking down until his face is smushed behind Petey's kidney. Not comfy; he sits up. "Of course you're into this movie," says Wade.

"Well yeah, it has not one but *two* massive big birds in feature roles."

"Bet you totally had a hard-on about that eagle when you saw this as a kid," Wade says. "Or whatever the less-sketchy equivalent of a hard-on is for that age. You have a hard-on right now, don't you?"

Petey swats his hand away. "I think *everyone* who saw this movie as a kid was super excited about that eagle. But I didn't start getting into birds until I was like... nineteen? Damn, I'm old."

Wade guffaws. "No you are NOT. I was a grown-ass adult when this movie came out. You, baby boy, are a baby boy."

"Yeah yeah, you're a real creep. That what you want to hear?"

"Not really."

"Good. 'Cause you're not." But he realizes his mistake before Wade can point it out. "Okay you ARE but you're not THAT kind of creep. You're more the lurking-in-the-closet-with-a-machete kind of creep than the hanging-around-campus-after-40-hitting-on-barely-legal-freshman-girls kind of creep."

"You always know what to say."

{It's not real.}

Wade shakes his head, sticks a pinky in his ear and wiggles it around.

{It's not.}

"Of course it's real," says Wade.

"I'm real," says Pete with what by now must be habit so automatic it counts as echolalia. "I'm here."

"I know, babe," Wade says with a squeeze and a very damp kiss to his ear.

Petey makes an offended sound and scrabbles, like a cat dropped into a full bathtub, to wipe the ear dry on his shoulder while Wade laughs utterly without mercy or remorse.

[It's not real.]

Wade's laughter quiets.

Wade's curled into the tightest ball he can fit into, actively blissing out on the (relative) silence in his head. Wrapped in his own cozy flesh-cocoon.

He first ended up in the fetal position partly because he was chilly, after catching his breath but before his sweat had dried, and mostly because he's not used to being fully in the buff except in the shower. (And even there he tends to wear a puffy pink shower cap — for the ironic lulz if anyone ever asked, but more honestly, to stave off that sense of being fully exposed.) But he finally saw there'd be no end to Petey pushing for what he wanted until he finally got it: a 100% naked Wade Wilson with his ass in the air and his face mostly hidden in his own wadded-up underwear.

It's usually easier, and most pleasant, to give baby boy what he wants.

Petey's no dimwit. He knows how much it cost Wade to do this for him, which might be why he's being such a determined big spoon tonight. Wade's attempt to accommodate by making himself small only works so far. Petey stretches around him like a junior-size condom, with short strands of taut webbing holding Wade in all the places Petey can't physically reach.

It's... nice.

Wade doesn't get "nice" that often, so the milquetoast connotation of the word is deceptive. "Nice" is a *treasure*.

And the boxes being fucked right out of his head is as priceless as a recovered U-boat holding a plunder of masterpiece artworks stacked to the ceiling. (They've been marathoning *White Collar* for the OT3 and the intense daddy vibes and the eye candy. It's a fun world to escape to, where crime doesn't necessarily hurt anyone and the protagonist is somehow both a hypercompetence power fantasy and a bratty submissive. There's also the autistic best friend who Petey says is well represented even if he hates the way all the other characters talk about him. Petey's never seen the show before.)

{He's too young to have seen it before, you sick cradle-robber...}

But the box's text and argument are both weak with fatigue. Wade grins a smug little grin, and lets himself be held.

As if seconding the motion, Petey squeezes him a little with all four limbs — feels like more than four, with the web-rigging pulling slightly in response. Like being hugged by an actual giant spider, which sounds like something that will definitely turn up plenty of horny results when Wade does an image search later. Dear Santa, thank you for the internet, hope you're not too busy to give the missus enough attention this year.

[It's not real.]

Ah, that old party line. Must be easy to sound convinced of yourself when you're only repeating the same trick that's worked about nine *hundred* times in the past. Wade grunts and hugs his knees tighter to his nipples. It increases the tension of Petey's web pulling at his elbow. The pulling stings his skin. The stinging keeps him focused.

It's definitely real. He's nude, after all. He'd never be lying here nude unless someone very persuasive wanted it very much, and that someone would *never* come from the inside of Wade's head.

And he knows the nudity isn't due to this all being a nightmare, because even the nightmares that start out good and then pull a bait-and-switch still never start out *this* tame and cozy.

“Quit squirmin’,” Petey mumbles.

“Never,” says Wade.

“Go to sleep.”

“Never.”

“Liar.”

[Not real...]

Real. Totally real.

{He... can't consent.}

Wade blinks and can't stop his body from tensing up. (Petey growls like a cat and squeezes tighter.) Wade's careful not to answer the boxes out loud. *How do you figure?*

{Too messed up. Can't think.}

You'd better start using full sentences or I'm gonna find a fork and —

[He needs this.]

Mixed signals much?

{If being this... with YOU... were really helping him...}

[...wouldn't he be getting better by now?]

Wade scowls. Sure, nothing's perfect, but Petey seems happy enough, he's getting back to his regular Spiderly activities...

[Wouldn't he be needing THIS... less?]

{Instead of more?}

It is true that Pete's been initiating things more often lately, and more often than Wade. But Petey's a man in his 20s with a lot of catching up to do —

[Wouldn't he be LESS clingy?]

{Instead of more?}

Wade's pretty sure that *he's* the clingy one —

[Just look at your position. How you're laying right now. Look at his.]

{Do the math.}

Wade hates math. “Maybe it doesn't work like antibiotics,” he says in a very low voice. “Maybe it's more like insulin?”

“Go t' sleep,” Petey slurs.

[Hm. Could be something to that. The sugar level around here's been REALLY high lately.]

{Don't help him!}

[You're not my real dad.]

Like insulin.

{Whatever helps you sleep, big guy...}

[...always tryna tell me what to do like you're...]

{PLEASE shut up...}

Please, please shut up.

Petey nips Wade on the shoulder, lightly. "Settle," he says like a warning.

"You're not my real dad."

Petey growls again, more firmly this time, and Wade settles.

Please.

It's Petey's turn to make breakfast — seems like that's the only *meal* they ever eat, regardless of time of day or night, minus Taco Tuesdays and pizza at least once a week — because Petey *decided* it was his turn.

Wade wasn't aware they were taking turns. He's only been making all-hours breakfast because he wants to and he knows Petey likes it, that simple.

[How zen of you.]

Today it's snowing, though, for the first time this winter give or take a few flurries that didn't stick, and evidently in Petey's world that means he has to make apple fritters, whatever those are.

[Sounds like Deep South cooking. Don't trust it.]

"I'll put anything in my mouth he tells me to, thank you very much," Wade says, primly. At the stove, Petey smiles, big, and says nothing.

They smell good and they're deep-fried, that's all Wade knows, and all he needs to know.

"But I dunno if I should trust this new Martha Stewart Spider-Man," he says from the shipping crate he parked himself on, right outside the kitchen, when Petey shooed him out of the room and forbade him from reentering.

[Forbade or for worse.]

{You're not as funny as you think you are. Stop trying to make friends.}

"I thought you didn't know how to cook anything," Wade says.

"Only the things I learned in home ec," Petey says. "Which amounts to grilled cheese, brownies

from a Betty Crocker box mix, and these.”

Wade puts his chin in his hand and breathes in that bubbling-oil smell. “I bet these were for the final,” he says with a curling half-grin. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You know I’d love to. I delight in seeing the hot air deflate from your head. Like the most gruesome Macy’s Day float in the line.” He drops something into the pot and the hissing overpowers their voices for a minute or so. “I got a C-minus,” Petey admits when the noise dies down. “I like to think I’ve improved since then. But it’s been a while since I even tried to do these, so don’t hate me if they’re raw in the middle.”

“Why would I hate you for that? Do I look like Paul Hollywood to you? Is that really how you see me?”

“I know you’ve committed like a zillion murders but no, Wade, I don’t think you’re *that* cruel.”

“Thank god, or whoever. That’d be a very serious accusation and I’m not ready for a ‘we need to talk’ conversation.”

“Jeez. You really hate that guy, huh?”

“He’s *clearly* harboring misogynistic tendencies and he *always* faults people for using flavors he *happens* to not *personally* enjoy which is *so* unprofessional I can’t *believe* he’s on TV and I’m not!”

“Don’t paint with such a broad brush. You’ve made the news plenty of times.”

“I mean I wanna be on TV in a *good* way.”

“Hm. I’m sure he wishes for that, too.”

“Ha!”

“I know I do. We should start a club. Maybe if he got to wear a jacket he’d mellow out a little and let go of his vendetta against matcha.”

“You can bring a bunch of fritattas to the first meeting.”

“Fritters. And no. This is like, a once-a-year-tops thing.”

“Boo.”

“Don’t say that before you’ve tried them.”

[BOOO!]

When Petey finally brings out a plate of steaming lumps and Wade gets to try them, he discovers that “fritters” is just a Teletubbies-sounding word for booger-shaped donuts. After the first mouth-scorching chomp he shoves it in wholesale, then swallows, folds his arms, leans forward, and says “Boo” very calmly into Petey’s face.

“Don’t like ‘em, huh?”

“No no, I’m reiterating my previous ‘boo’ about this only being an annual thing. We should do these like at least monthly.”

“I guess I could arrange that. *If.*”

“If what?”

“You deal with the dishes for once in your damn life.”

Wade cracks his knuckles. “Oh, I’ll *deal* with ‘em.”

“Not as in breaking. As in washing, drying, and putting away.”

Oh. “That’s way less fun.”

Petey lifts his brows, mildly.

[But we wanted to step in the shards!]

{They go crunch.}

[Tyrant. He’s a tyrant.]

{Draconian.}

[You may like ‘em bossy, big guy, but making us do chores has gotta be a limit.]

“Fine,” says Wade. “But then I get to pick the video game and/or movie and/or series.”

Petey rolls his eyes *super* hard. “Fiiine.”

Wade picks *Fraggle Rock*.

Later that night, Petey starts singing the theme song under his breath. In bed.

It’s... distracting. Wade complains.

“You brought this on yourself,” he tells Wade. “And I didn’t say stop.”

Can’t argue with that.

[Oh yeah? Watch us.]

But there’s no more chatter or disruptive imagery from the boxes for the rest of the night. Wade tries to enjoy the reprieve, but all he can make room for in his brain is dread of what the rest of his brain might be planning. His hands won’t stop twitching into fists. It takes a while to fall asleep.

He wakes up with a headache and snarls when Petey goes to put an arm around him.

“Yeesh, sor-ry,” says Petey, and gets up without trying again.

Wade tries to call him back, but he’s already in the bathroom with the water running.

Petey comes up behind him while he’s cracking eggs over a pan and puts his arms around Wade’s waist.

“There’s no more bacon,” Wade says.

Because *that's* what a sensible person says when they feel an erection pressing up against their ass through thin flannel PJ pants.

“Hm. Guess I'll have to settle for alternative meat.” His hand finds Wade's cock through the apron without needing to feel around for it first. Petey's hands know *just* where to go and damn if that ain't smokin' hot.

“The eggs'll burn,” Wade warns.

Petey reaches past him with his other hand and turns off the stove.

{Stop grinding your teeth. It sounds like a subway platform up here.}

Call the superintendent, Wade suggests, silently so as not to wake baby boy from his post-coital coma — unlikely though that may be. Once he drops off, he sleeps so deep after sex that Wade checked for a pulse the first couple times.

{What do you think is happening right now?}

That's either a reply to Wade's snarky suggestion or a request for a reality check. Considering the source, probably the former. “Go away,” Wade whispers. “I'm busy.”

[You ain't doing \$#&! Pipe down!]

Wade scoffs and grinds his jaw as tight as he can. Payback's a bitch and so is he.

The grinding makes Petey stir a little — the vibration right next to his ear — and Wade opens his jaw.

{He sure came back for more fast enough after his little storm-off this morning.}

That's a molehill, not a mountain.

[He couldn't help it. Shortbus needs nookie in order to function now.]

And that's inaccurate.

{When's the last morning he managed to get started without it?}

Wade doesn't like to think of such dreadful things as mornings without morning sex.

{Not since this got started.}

What's the point of asking someone a question if you're just gonna answer it yourself a second later? Condescending, is what that is. Passive-aggressive.

{And just exactly how often does a day go by when morning sex is the ONLY sex y'all have?}

All the time! That happened just the other... two and a half weeks ago, or something.

[How often is it three or more times in a day? ;)]

Oh, at least four times a week. Bless healing-factor refractory periods and how they don't exist.

{Don't use emoticons, it's tacky.}

[>:O You're not the boss!]

Wade's gone six times a day for three or four days running before, during masturbation marathons meant to stave off the ennui of repeated suicides. Baby boy can't *quite* keep up with that, but with practice, who knows...

[He sure seems intent to try.]

{Almost like he's HOOKED or something.}

"If you're trying to work a prostitution joke in there somewhere, I'll have you know I'm very pro-rights for sex workers—"

[It'd be rude of you NOT to be, the number of times you've relied upon their valuable services.]

Actually not that many. Wade isn't keen on inflicting himself on people who'd really rather not, thanks.

[Since WHEN?!]

{Since WHEN??}

Never mind. "I know where you're trying to go with this," he mutters. "And it's ruining my afterglow."

{Says the one who was lying here grinding his chompers in his supposed lover's sleeping ear.}

[And that's where sweet nothings are supposed to go!]

{It's true.}

"Hey Tommy, how's the peepin'?"

[It's kinda hard to ignore.]

{We TRIED to get you to pipe down, remember?}

"You could try a little harder. Heck, you could try doing anything besides bitching to me about it!"

[We're open to suggestions.]

{You should ask yourself why you're stressed out when you should by all rights be blissed out. There's no mystery, if you ever bothered to think about it.}

[You're in the discomfort of your own home, wrapped around a sleeping and sexually satisfied Spider-Man. You should be so happy we can't even get near you.]

"Don't tell me how the fuck to feel," Wade says in a cheerful tone, thinking that anger would be more likely to disturb Petey's sleep.

{Cool it, big guy, or you really WILL wake him up.}

[Do it! He might ask for more!]

Actually, he probably would. Wade considers.

{If you loved him, you would never consider that.}

“What, giving him what he wants?”

[Waking him up so you can get gratified.]

{Sleep’s probably better for him than anything you could ever do.}

[Give the kid a break. He doesn’t know what he wants.]

Wade has to bite his lip bloody to stop the big, guffawing belly-laugh from shaking them both right onto the floor. “Try telling *him* that!” he whisper-screams. “My *god* have you been paying the slightest bit of attention?!”

[Your god? Who would that be, exactly?]

{It’s not offensive. It’s true.}

[In a larger sense.]

{He knows he likes to #&@% and HOW he likes to #&@%, that’s all. He doesn’t know crap about WHETHER he really wants to #&@%, or who, or why...}

[You have made yourself AWFULLY convenient for him.]

Sure, well, why make it even harder for someone to be with Wade W. Wilson?

{Because it’s the right thing to do and you know it.}

“I do *not* ‘know’ that, fuck you very much. And just because I don’t know shit for shit doesn’t mean he’s as in the dark as I am. He’s the smart one, remember?”

[If he’s so smart, why does he seem to think boinking you is gonna end well for him?]

{He probably suspects otherwise. That’s probably why he’s been asking for it more and more. He’s trying to stay in front of his own neuroses.}

“Is not.”

[Is too.]

“Is not!”

{Go on, then, wake him up.}

[Triple dog dare ya.]

{See if he can stand being with you for ten minutes without pushing for an orgasm or a free breakfast.}

“He does it all the time.”

[Must be easier with video games.]

{See if he can deal with having a reasonable amount of distance from you, or if he gets clingy again.}

[What does ‘codependent’ mean again?]

{You’re his lidocaine.}

[You’re his anaesthesia.]

{You’re his bourbon on the rocks.}

[You’re his run at suicide.]

{He’ll waste away and die if he stays here.}

[You’ll kill him. You don’t even have to try. You’re the death of everyone.]

{Except yourself.}

[You can’t help it.]

{But that doesn’t mean it’s not your fault. It is. It is your fault.}

[He’s the one using you, but you’re the one taking advantage of him by LETTING him. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. But you know.]

{If you keep enabling him, he’s going to lose everything. Who knows what’ll happen to him when he looks around and sees that he’s lost everything in his life except for you. He’ll die.}

Wade sits up, throws the covers off his bare legs, breathes into the dark for a few moments. “You’re makin’ a biiiig leap here,” he manages.

{Do you WANT him to die?!}

“NO!! Shut the FUCK up!”

“Wade...?”

[Look, you can’t even let him sleep. He’s gonna be too tired and fall off a building some night because of you.]

{Disrespectful. Rude.}

“Sorry, Petey-babe.”

“Wha’s happ’nin?”

“Nothing, baby boy. Just me being a dumbass again.” He kisses Petey above the ear. “Go back to sleep.”

“Mm. ‘Kay.”

{You’re trapping him here.}

[Every time you talk to him and DON'T break up with him, you're only making it harder.]

{You could end all this. You could end this SO EASILY.}

[But you won't.]

{Because you're selfish. You'd rather play games than save him, fine. Go ahead and play games.}

Wade thinks they're the ones playing, but won't risk saying so, in case Petey's still awake enough to hear.

{It'd be one thing letting him cling to you if you could be like his life ring, but you're not. You're an anchor.}

"Maybe that's what he needs."

[He doesn't need to be dependent. He doesn't need you keeping him needy and clingy.]

{You LOVE to be needed. You're selfish.}

"He's not clingy!"

Too loud. Petey rolls toward him, and his arms are reaching for Wade before his eyes are even open. Wade offers an arm, and Petey clutches it to his chest and rubs the side of his face, catlike, against Wade's inner elbow.

[Sure looks like clinginess from here.]

{And he wasn't like this even two weeks ago. Was he.}

[He's getting worse. You're letting him get worse. Look at him.]

Alright already, thinks Wade. So he's clingy. And it doesn't suck to be wanted, so what.

Petey looks up the length of Wade's arm to his unmasked face, smiles, then lowers his head all bashful-like and adorable. Guh. Wade feels it in the cockles of his bloodpump.

[What are cockles, anyway? Are they what they sound like? 'Cause that's a weird thing for a heart to have, much less in plurality.]

{There. This should be all the proof you need, big guy. If slumming it with the likes of you was helping him, he'd need less of it over time, not more. He wouldn't feel any urge to cling at all.}

Wade thinks — but he's not sure, because it sounds kinda fake — but he *thinks* that the uptick in clinginess *could* just mean that Petey likes it — or likes *him* — and that's the only reason why he wants more. It sure is why Wade wants more.

[Bold of you to assume anyone works the same way you do. You're the most broken person we know.]

{We're BEGGING you to face it: you're doing more harm than good here.}

As likely as that sounds — *Two plus two don't add up to animal cruelty*, Wade thinks.

{You think we're saying that he's been using you, but we're not. He's not. You've been using HIM.}

“What? For what?”

Petey lets go of his arm and slides out of bed, off toward the bathroom. He knows an exit cue when he sees one, because he’s a good person like that who pays attention to Wade’s brain. He’s not wearing pants and the leg seam of his underwear is hiked up on one side, revealing a perfect gibbous-moon slice of the perfect peach that is his ass. Wade sighs in happy distraction.

[Exhibit A.]

{Well, that and the psychological validation you’re so murderously hungry for.}

“Hey now, I’ve really cut back on the murder.”

[Oh, give the man a trophy.]

{Someone already did. The trophy’s using the bathroom right now.}

Wade scratches his right ankle with the toenails of his left foot. A flake of skin breaks away and drops to the floor.

{Nervous? You shed more when you’re nervous.}

[You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog.]

{Could it be... that you agree?}

“Oh god, don’t start rhyming,” Wade says — and if he’s begging a little, that’s spillover desperation, that’s all. He takes the gun from the nightstand, pops the clip, empties the magazine back into the drawer, one by one. Shakes out the last one hiding out in the chamber. He lifts his mask off the top of the nightstand and pulls it on.

He slides out of bed and adjusts his boxers.

{You know what you gotta do.}

[Don’t wuss out.]

{He’ll DIE.}

[Don’t let him die. Not him.]

{Not HIM.}

Petey comes out of the bathroom. Wade is standing right there. He’s not sure when he moved there from the edge of the bed.

“Do you think I might be bad for you?” Wade blurts, loudly.

[Don’t ask HIM that!!]

Pete pauses, head tilted. “I hadn’t really thought about it,” he says. “You’re not, like, a greasy bacon burger or anything. My arteries feel fine and I’m not gaining too much weight.” He slips past with a yawn and into the living room, where he sits down in front of Mt. Laundry with his back to Wade, picks up a clean shirt, and starts folding.

“But don’t you think—“ Wade cuts himself off, literally wringing his hands. It feels kinda wrong

to be saying this to Petey's back. But Petey doesn't turn around from what he's doing, so Wade presses on feeling wrong because however it feels it's still gotta be said: "Don't you think you'd be better off with someone else?"

Petey *laughs*.

Unbelievable. Wade could sock him one.

"Who exactly did you have in mind?" he says over his shoulder. "Nobody's lining up at the door. And no way am I crawling back to my aunt's house like the dropout statistic I am. You think one of Cap's people would fix me up with someone? Some lonely-hearted SHIELD agent whose idea of a second date is wiretapping each other's phones?"

"Maybe," Wade insists, folding his arms over his chest.

"You know how many people put 'secretly Spider-Man' on their OKCupid profiles? And you know how many of *those* don't even mean it as a joke? Because I do. I wish I didn't." He shakes his head and addresses Mt. Laundry. "For a world of almost eight billion, there's disappointingly few I'd be interested in. And why should I care anyway when I've already got my very favorite one right here," he adds with a helping of sugar.

That shouldn't feel like a sledgehammer to the pancreas, it really shouldn't.

[And yet? It does. That should tell you something.]

{Yeah: just what you already know.}

[Get on with it.]

"I think you should see other people." The words rush by him. He feels the wind as they go, and not much else.

Petey hears the difference this time. His hands freeze in midair for a moment, then matter-of-factly lay down the burgundy shirt they'd been folding. He still doesn't turn around yet.

{Don't stop now. You know what to do. You know how to keep people away from you.}

[That's what Tiggers do best.]

"Yeah," says Wade and no those are NOT suppressed tears gasping in his chest those are just DEMONS, "yeah you heard me."

Things become slow-motion, the kind of strobing slow-mo that comes with the real hefty adrenaline kicks sometimes, as Petey pushes himself back from his knees up onto the balls of his feet and begins to pivot around. Like bullet time, like in *The Matrix*. It's been a long time since Wade experienced this, not since his military days when everything was a lot scarier and he was a lot angrier to make up for it. And he doesn't remember a whole lot about those days because he's got like nineteen different versions in his head of his life pre-Weapon X.

[Would you like to know how I got these scars?]

If there's time for boxes to make dated references to dead actors then there should be plenty of time to stop his own arm from doing what it's reflexively doing —

{Not reflexively. Don't blame your reflexes. You planned this.}

— against his will but aligned with habit and instinct and all those other violent reasons why it really is better for Petey to be with almost anyone else —

[You wondered what might happen if you let this happen. You THOUGHT about it.]

{So whatever happens next is on you.}

— and raising his sidearm as Petey’s head continues to turn, glacially —

[Why are you wearing your mask? Why are you coming at this like it’s a job?]

— to face him, to look at him —

{It IS a job.}

— with those eyes.

[He'd rather be seeing your eyes right now.]

Time resumes.

Petey’s staring at the gun. Wade would like to be staring at the gun also, demanding to know just what in the hell it thinks it’s doing. Instead he’s staring at Petey. He wishes he was looking anywhere but.

Their eyes meet and the gun is between them.

Oh god no it hurts

“What’s this?” Peter asks. Quietly. Very quietly. The sound slashes through Wade’s guts.

Wade’s hand isn’t shaking. It’s not.

“Wade. What is this?”

{What’s it look like?}

“What’s it look like?”

“It looks like you’re pointing a gun at me. In our own home. Wearing the mask you wear when you kill people.”

{Not our home.}

Wade breathes in through his teeth. The air feels cold. His stomach feels cold. His arms feel surface-numb.

[Say it.]

“Not our home,” he says. “My home.”

[Not even. Your SQUAT.]

{As in squat, nada, jack shit. It’s all you deserve.}

Spider-Man’s not buying it. “Wade, would you talk to me, please? Would you put that down and

come over here and talk to me, please?”

[C'mere, Francine! Whatdowedo?!]

Wade doesn't put it down. He doesn't lower it or move it to the side. He doesn't look at it.

He doesn't talk.

Peter waits for him to talk.

{He's not gonna move while he's under gunpoint. You're gonna have to give him a little push if you wanna make him leave. A little kick in the pants.}

[Not literally, please. No telling what the ol' motor control is like just now. Don't wanna break his face open like a piñata.]

Wade wonders what more of a “push” out the door Petey could need than a fucking gun to the head.

[Lassie routine?]

Lassie routine.

{He'll never buy it.}

Wade has to try. He's out of other ammo. “Tired of you sticking around.”

[LOL spider pun.]

“Eating all my food. Hogging all the hot water. Beating my high scores. Bossing me around. Cleaning up my messes. Picking movies that make me cry. Making me feel stuff.”

“You like most of those things,” Petey says, and the knife twists in the other direction.

“No I don't!”

[Yes you do. You're bad at this all of a sudden. Since when are you bad at driving people away?]

{You're not even trying.}

[You'd BETTER try.]

Wade jabs the air with the gun, as if to emphasize its presence. Man, that's such a weak move. Even guys on TV only do that when they're crying and about to be talked into putting the gun down.

{DON'T put the gun down!}

[Stop crying!]

“I'm *not* crying!” Wade says. “Dammit! Pick up your shit, Todd!”

Petey's crying, but it's just water and a little snot rolling down his face. He's not moving or making any sounds, not sniffing or sobbing or wrinkling the skin around his eyes or anything, just sitting there in silence not looking at the gun, looking past the gun, looking at Wade as if the gun weren't

even there while the whole ocean trails down his face, two drops at a time, from red eyes.

[That's it, it's the end of the world.]

{No... just the end of his.}

[Why would you say that?! That's even worse!!]

This is starting to feel like a mistake.

{“Starting”?}

[It's not a mistake. The mistake was not doing it ages ago.]

{It can't be a mistake.}

Petey finally stands up, and finally says something, but either he's too quiet or the screaming in Wade's head is too loud. Just a pair of lips mouthing sad shapes against the space between them. Probably saying something sensible and heartbreaking, Wade doesn't know. He can't know. His eyes lose focus and refuse to sharpen, like with a migraine.

He's still aiming the gun at Mt. Laundry long after chilly air has moved in to take up the empty space Petey left behind there. Long after the air has gone still everywhere but in the thin channel connecting Wade's nose to his lungs. Feels thinner than usual. Breathing feels like a squeeze both inwards and outwards.

“What did I do?” he wheezes.

He looks around. The shadows have moved. There's one missing.

{It's called “the right thing”.}

[Sucks, don't it?]

Wade lowers the gun.

[Can we go back to being a bad guy yet? You never have to question the morality of your own actions when you're a bad guy.]

{It's a bit like being on drugs. "Was that the right thing to do?" "Gosh, I dunno, Bob, I'm on drugs!" Hey, big guy, let's get some drugs.}

“...I really, really wish you'd stop saying that,” says Wade. His voice sounds literally deflated. Flat and floppy and weak.

{What, this is your egg on drugs?}

“That this was the right thing to do.”

[But it was!]

{It had to be.}

[It's always the right thing.]

Wade's arm is shaking, but he thinks it's just from the exertion of holding it up for such a long

time.

{Oh please. As if you're not dissociated beyond all perception of time.}

It feels good to bend his stiff elbow. The barrel is November-cold against his temple. The trigger pulls too easily but the hammer snaps feebly and echoes through an empty chamber.

{You JUST unloaded that thing. Forget already?}

[Like ANY of us would ever point a LOADED gun at Shortbus...]

Oh... right.

{Do you think he knew? He wasn't SCARED, like, at all.}

[Not of getting shot, anyway.]

{That makes it a little better, right?}

“...Right,” Wade says.

He must really be shellshocked, though, because a second later some clarity clicks into place and he says, “No! No, actually, that makes it *so much worse*.”

And he throws down the gun and starts rummaging through his stash spots to find one that's still loaded and ready to go, because he doesn't have the focus right now to fiddle with reloading, and there's no way now that this chapter isn't ending in suicide.

{Bold of you to assume that our POV accounts for the entire chapter.}

Peter decides he's going to walk the whole way back to Aunt May's. It's not a small distance, but he could use both the lower-body exercise — the kind that he's not horizontal for — and the time to himself.

Plenty of time to rehearse how he's going to tell her about... well, everything, within reasonable parameters. Everything not directly related to Spidey.

Which still includes getting fired, getting injured, being kidnapped by his friends, being homeless, joining a cult, and briefly having a boyfriend and oh by the way he's bisexual, surprise.

Confession is a steep cost of entry, but if the reward is getting to move back in and cry in his childhood bed for like a year, it's a price he's willing to pay. Somehow, after everything he's been through, all the losses and humiliations and failures he's endured, his heart's never been so *tired* as it is now.

He finds a crisp twenty in the left back pocket of his jeans. Wade likes — *liked* to do that, to leave easter eggs of cash stashed around what amounted to Peter's person. It was his workaround. Peter didn't have money of his own and refused to take any of Wade's if he had any say in it, so Wade seemed to delight in removing Peter's say.

And he always favored the left-hand pockets. Peter's sure that's not coincidence, but isn't so sure of its significance.

Another mystery to be left unsolved.

To add to the growing pile of guess-I'll-never-know.

Which has more than doubled in size in the last hour, thanks to all the never-knows regarding things like how Wade would've responded to the scene Peter had been planning for the last few weeks, and whether Wade would've pouted about the lost time together once Peter found a new job, and what it might look like if they picked out a new place to move into together, and whether Wade would've been content to just Be Together or if he would've started pushing for the all-too-breakable promise of a ring.

Peter grits. This is definitely *not* rehearsing his story for Aunt May.

The surfaces of his cheeks are stiff where the wind is trying to freeze his tears. He rubs his face on the sleeve of his hoodie — one of Wade's hoodies, far too big on Peter and that's why it's so warm, and screw him, he's never getting it back now.

Peter doesn't really want to keep any of Wade's things, out of pride if nothing else, but it's far too cold out to discard the layer now. So as of this moment, he decides, it's *his* hoodie, not Wade's.

(The decision doesn't help as much as he hoped it would.)

And he doesn't really want to spend any of Wade's money. Before, it made him feel like a kept man, and now, on the cold windy street, it makes him feel like a discarded hustler. But he's hungry, and it is a *very* long walk back home to Queens. He needs fuel.

It's still over two hours of trudging before he's close enough to civilization to find a source of dollar-a-slice pizza. But he walks out with two folded up in one hand, a third in the other, and \$16-and-change stuffed back into his pocket. Enough for public transit if he gets too tired and loses his resolve to hoof it. The pizza warms his fingers.

Juggling so much food lands two new grease stains on the stolen hoodie. Serves it right. He forces the rest of the slice into his mouth, sucks the grease off his fingers, and uses his newly freed hand to stretch out the fabric so he can see the stains better. This was one of Wade's only shirts without any stains; that's why Peter had gravitated toward it.

His lower lip and lower eyelids start wobbling and he sniffs back a wad of something gross.

"No, *you're* gross," he says to himself. "Get it together, Parker."

No, he thinks back. *I'm a mess and you're just gonna have to deal with it.*

"Huh... Maybe it is better to leave him, if hanging around him so much has got me talking to myself in public like this."

You don't really believe that, he thinks.

How *dare* he question his judgment!

Wait. Dare whomst, what?

"Ugh, my brain," Peter moans. He leans his upper back against an old wooden lightpost to finish eating. It's studded with staples from years' worth of flyers and he can feel every last one poking him through the shirt, but it's probably better not to multitask anything right now, not even eating and walking. He feels almost concussed, he's so out of it. Or like he hasn't slept in days.

There's food in his mouth but he hasn't bitten down yet when something knocks into him. The

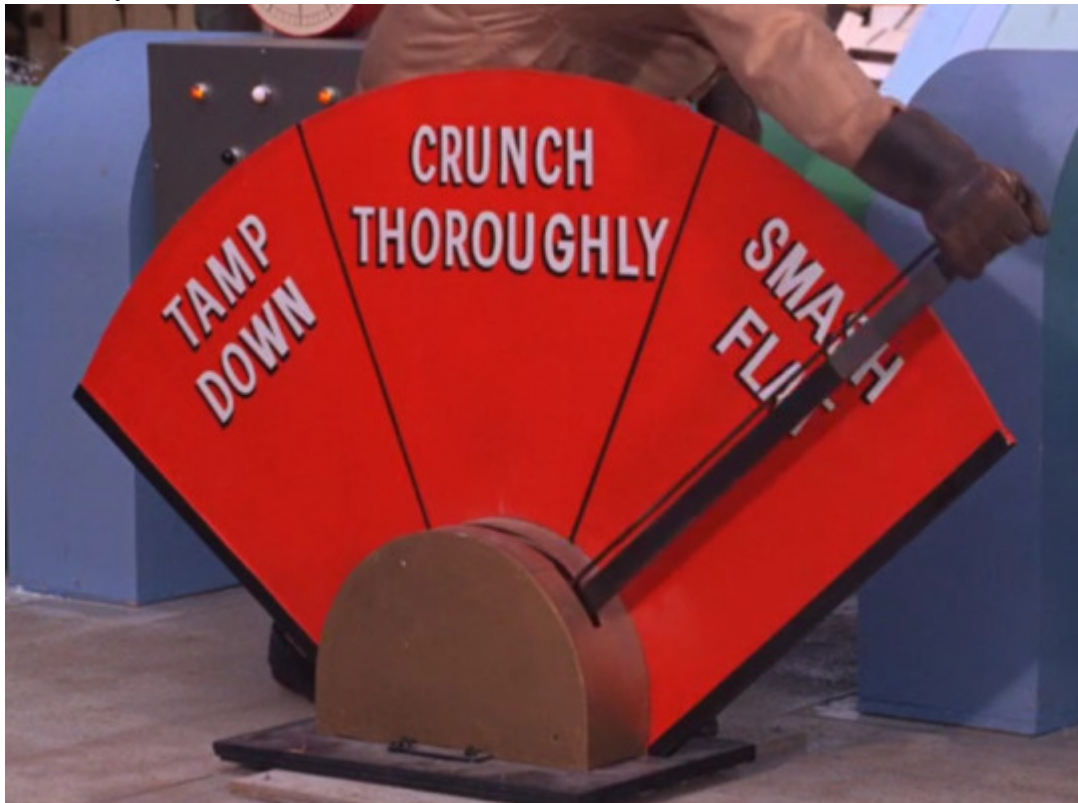
remaining slice-and-a-half hit the sidewalk and with indignation he watches them splat. He's so annoyed he feels a jolt of Spidey-sense.

It's when he takes a breath to complain that he realizes there's a rag over his nose and mouth and *that's* what made him drop the food.

He has just enough clarity to grumpily think *Chloroform? Seriously?* before falling over sideways into unwelcome arms and dizzying blackness.

Chapter End Notes

me @ my readers' emotions:



(Sorry — I had to do it.)

Next chapter: Violence. I think what this fic needs is one more good solid round of violence before we start wrapping things up.

My Beloved Monster

Chapter Summary

In which Wade comes to what passes for his senses, Peter screams about birds, and the author doesn't know shit about what the bad guys are even trying to do.

Chapter warnings: Violence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[What's ringing? Who's calling? Hello? Someone answer the &\$# phone.]

{Hit the snooze, pls, kthxbye.}

[Make it sto-o-op. It's REALLY annoying.]

Look who's talking. Wade smacks his head with the heel of his hand. "Ow." The phone stops ringing. He fingers the edge of the exit wound in the back of his head. All closed up now, but still squishy where the skull is regrowing. Probably shouldn't get up yet. Right now he's still like a baby crab waiting for its newly grown shell to harden. And if *they* just sit there on the bottom of the ocean not moving until it's time, well. Mother Nature knows best. He settles in best he can — just goes ragdoll-limp in place, in other words.

The phone rings.

{UGH. Just leave a message already.}

"I concur," says Wade, but he rolls onto his side toward the sound, squinting at the back of the couch. Knowing the phone is on the other side of it, on the coffee table formerly known as fridge.

[What an awkward spot in the room to die.]

"Shaddap. It's too early for your bullshit."

{It's probably like three in the morning.}

[More like three in the afternoon, judging by the light.]

"You *can't* keep track of time when we're dead and you *can't* convince me otherwise," says Wade. "And I *can't* believe how many times I've had to say that."

The ring cycle finishes, then starts up again a moment later.

"Ugh!"

{UGH.}

[\$%^&.]

{Answer it. Please.}

“I’m *trying*.” It’s not easy going, and it’s floor lint and food crumbs all the way, getting embeded in his palms and elbows and knees. “I need a shower,” he says as he finally lays hand on his dubious prize and turns to lean his back against the front of the couch. “Oh. Private number.”

[Bet it’s a debt collector.]

{We’re square with everyone. Bet it’s a scammer.}

[They’re not usually persistent.]

The ringing stops.

“All well, I tried.”

{Don’t be like that.}

The ringing starts.

[Don’t be a snob.]

Wade glares at the corner of the fridge-table, wishing for the billionth time that he had *something* definite to glare at when he wants to give the boxes a dirty look.

{You could always try your reflection.}

[And risk cracking the mirror?]

His glare deepens to a glower, and he raises the phone to his ear.

“Mr. Wilson, this is JARVIS speaking. Please hold for a moment while I connect you to Mr. Stark.”

Wade throws back his head and screams at the ceiling. It echoes through the Goatse-cavern of a place. There’s no response on the other end of the line. “You been blowin’ me up all day and then you put me on *hold*?”

[The NERVE.]

{No WAY are we going to homecoming with him NOW.}

The hold music that plays is Nine Inch Nails, so that’s at least something —

{Yeah, it’s yet another sign of his gratuitous wealth that he paid for the licensing, is what it is.}

— but it still cuts out every two seconds, and is so quality-degraded it sounds like the notes are being forced through a paper shredder from the ‘90s, and every fifteen seconds or so a robot-lady interrupts it to remind Wade that his call is important to us, please stay on the line.

“Is this hell? This must be what hell is like.”

The music pops and Tony’s voice comes through, crisp as life. “There you are! Finally. You know I been waiting for J to get through to you for *two hours*? You’re extremely hard to get ahold of for someone who’s so desperate for attention.”

“Uh, hello, hi, how are you. Second of all, projecting much?”

“No time. They got our boy.”

He feels like he swallowed a stone. “Clarify?”

“One of my dragonflies got footage of him in your neck of the woods getting chloroformed and stuffed in a white panel van like something out of an old episode of *True Crime*. Happened less than three hours ago, broad daylight and all. Saw it with my own eyes and I’d attend to it with my own two hands except they’re kinda buried up to the elbows in things that’ll literally explode if I put them down before they’re done. And when I say I saw it I mean the algorithm automatically blurred out his face but the system pinged it as him and JARVIS wouldn’t lie to me, we’ve known each other too long.”

“Dragonflies? What? And by ‘him’ you mean...?”

“*Webs*, you dense mother. Your friendly neighborhood boyfriend or whatever. They took Spidey and they took him out of uniform. Why else would I be calling *you*? I know you’re his best watchdog. Besides, Cap’s still in DC and I’m in Malibu.”

Wade yawns. “Why do I find you difficult to believe...?”

“You don’t bel— fine. Fine! Have a look for yourself.”

Through Stark-magic he manages to autoplay a video on Wade’s phone that Wade didn’t download, and manages to do it without hanging up. Looks like drone footage.

At least five guys—

[Let’s go get a burger.]

—two on each arm and one with what sure does look like a chloroformed rag pressing over the blurry oval on top of what’s clearly Petey’s body wearing one of Wade’s hoodies. Petey’s limbs only tense for a short second or two before he sags in the waiting arms of not-very-big-looking guys wearing back-of-the-closet black.

What a rinky-fucking-dink operation to get the jump on New York’s greatest proletarian hero...

Blurry-face Petey goes into the back of a van and everything in Wade’s world goes reddish-black at the edges. He grapples the fridge-table with his free hand, dragging himself up onto his knees with the other. He puts the phone back to his ear. “Point me in a direction,” he says.

“I’ll download a live map leading you straight to him as soon as you hang up.”

Wade hangs up.

{He probably had more intel to share. Y’know, like who took him, how many will be waiting and how well-armed, maybe what they want with you...}

He thumbs the DOWNLOAD button the second it appears and makes a mental note to *literally* burn this phone when this is over to exorcise this reminder of the Tin Man’s lassaiz-faire surveillance-state bullshit because he did *not* give Stark this number and he doesn’t even wanna guess how easy it was for him to convince the phone to install the live-map app without any permissions or anything.

[Shouldn't you be obsessing about Shortbus instead?]

“Oh,” says Wade, “*I am*. Distraction is how I deal with emotional overwhelm, remember what the doctor said?”

[What DO they want with you? And how did they figure out they could get to you through him?]

“Bold of you to assume they’re after me,” says Wade.

{Well it's got to be a trap. White panel van? C'mon.}

“White panel van just means a kiddie-diddler who mistook him for someone much younger. Wouldn't be hard to do.”

{FIVE of 'em working together?}

[The fact they took him out at ALL suggests otherwise. You gotta be READY to wrangle with Spidey.]

“Looked like they just surprised him. His startle response shuts down or goes screwy when he gets upset.”

{Ah. So this is your fault, then.}

““Course it's my fault. He'd be *here* if I hadn't...”

[If you hadn't... what? Done the right th—]

“Don't. Say it.” He's almost standing; he focuses on scaling the couch with his hands.

{Well look. Either they're after you, or they know who he is.}

Wade's all the way up on his feet now, and takes a moment to test his balance and consider this new angle. “You're right,” he decides, “it's a trap and they're after me.”

[Alternative doesn't bear consideration, eh?]

“Where's the suit.”

{Bedroom floor.}

[Y'know what WOULD'VE been great on the bedroom fl—OW!]

{That's enough. He's already about to get us killed.}

“You only die once,” says Wade, lifting the suit from the floor.

[Wha... n... no we don't...]

{If we end up in another lab because of this BOY, big guy, swear to god you're gonna wake up one night with your testicles sawn off. For your own good.}

[...tired of dying...]

“Tough cookies. We're going.”

Peter is aware of the pressure encircling his wrists before anything else, and that's what makes him groan, and that's what lets them know he's regained consciousness. The bite of metal edges tells him it's handcuffs, which are easy enough to separate, if getting out of the actual shackles takes a bit more focused effort.

Spidey-sense is quieter than it seems like it should be, given the circumstances. Maybe the chloroform's after-effects are messing with it.

He's chest-down on the ground (concrete, roughly poured) and the cold feels good against his left eye, which means someone clocked him one after he was out. Cowards. Also why does the universe seem to have it out for his left eye?

He opens his good eye onto shadows and gloom and a section of what he can only assume is a long track of conveyer belt. A mysterious dust-covered machine straddles the conveyer belt at one part. With his face stuck at a kind of dutch angle on the floor, all you'd have to do is ratchet up the color saturation and he'd think he was on a villain's lair set on the 1960s *Batman* soundstage. He wonders if he's about to be loosely tied to the conveyer belt with thin rope and told how he's going to be turned into baked alaska or something.

That casts Wade in the role of caped crusader, though, and picturing him coming in wearing tights and spiky booties with eyebrows painted on his mask to *Wham! Pow!* Peter's way to freedom is just too much. He snickers. His voice is coarse from the cold air.

It's only afterward that he remembers Wade is no longer feeling inclined to stick close by or look out for Peter's welfare.

"Maybe you really are retarded," someone says, "if you see something here to laugh about."

Uncalled for. Peter rotates his head on the point of his chin but still can't see anyone. "Maybe you can tell me something," he says into the empty unheated air. His teeth are clenched by the force of gravity so he has to talk through them. "Why's it always, like, a warehouse or an abandoned factory or a parking garage? Why's it always spacious and with a concrete floor?"

"'Always'?" they say. "This happen to you a lot, ya gimp?"

He tightens his wrists against the handcuffs. Tempting. Sooo tempting. But he's not wearing his mask. "I mean like on tv," he says. "This happens *all* the time on tv." When his voice gets above a certain volume it makes his top molars vibrate, like when he has a sinus infection that just won't quit. It's annoying.

"Well I won't pretend I'm sorry to tell you this is real, very real," says a different voice — Peter nearly snaps the cuffs by accident when he tenses at the sound.

"I know you're not what you pretend to be, Mikey," Drew goes on, suddenly much closer. "Or rather, that you *are* something you pretend *not* to be."

"That's right, Bella, I'm a vampire," says Peter. "I dare you to ask me to bite you."

"Bite me," Drew says, immediately and without a trace of good humor.

"Aw, it's no fun if you say it like that."

Drew steps on Peter between the shoulder blades as he steps over him; Peter tries not to grunt or

make a sound but the air is forced out of him by all the weight of a stunningly average middle-aged white man. His back gives a chiropractic pop. It does not feel good.

Some low conversation to Peter's left.

He rolls his shoulders the best he can with the floor in the way, to try and get the stiffness out, and wonders if he should plot this out a little first or just kinda go for it. There's the question of his identity, and keeping it secret, versus the intense temptation to break Drew in half right down the middle — since Peter's got him in a secluded creepy location like this already anyway.

But unless Peter's planning on *killing* him (tempting though the fantasy may be) and every other person in here — however many that is — plus anyone (*if* anyone) standing guard outside... he's stuck playing the role of Mikey again. With all the abilities thereof, which is to say, with absolutely no tricks up his sleeve besides a pretty solid working knowledge of constructing homemade explosives, all of which *they* taught him.

Peter realizes he *hates* being Mikey.

"It's a whoooole jar of pickles, innit," Peter says, out loud because it's one of Aunt May's personal pet phrases and Peter picked it up from her in the form of an echo, so now he can't really think the phrase without also saying it out loud and with borrowed inflection.

He wishes he'd been calling her up on the phone sometimes.

Don't think like that, Parker. You're not gonna die here. Not because of these jackoffs.

Still. He realizes now just how badly he was looking forward to eating her microwaved leftovers tonight and then pouring the crumbs of his broken heart out all over the table and then ice cream probably, she always has ice cream in the house— "A whoooole jar of pickles, innit."

"Shut up over there."

"You shut up," Peter says. "Whisper whisper whisper! Mutter mutter mutter! Stop talking about me like I'm not even here, it's rude as hell."

"Stop trying to interrupt conversations that don't include you," Drew says, reasonably enough.

"If you wanted to talk in private, you could always uncuff me and I'll step out to give you some space."

They put duct tape over his mouth after that. It's gonna suck to pull that off later. Last time someone did this the tape took some skin off with it and left the edge of his lower lip raw and puffy. He thinks it depends on how long the tape is on there, how long the adhesive has to cure, and that gets him to start wondering how long it's going to take to get out of this mess with his identity intact and hopefully Drew in some kind of custody. His neck is sore.

This was just allll that was missing from his day so far. Though now it must be getting close to nighttime, if not already.

He twists onto his side and works his cuffed hands down past his ass, folding and pulling his legs backward through the loop of his arms so his hands are bound in front of him instead of behind. He picks at the corner of the duct tape with a fingernail then pulls it off slowly. (The band-aid approach was how he lost skin last time.)

They must not be paying him very close attention — or they must not care very much, for having

gone to all the trouble of kidnapping him — because no one says anything about it or tries to stop him. Maybe because even with the tape off he keeps his mouth shut this time. Peter rolls the shoulder he's not lying on. Man, when this is over he's gonna shower until all the hot water in the city is *gone*.

"Wouldn't you agree," says Drew, voice suddenly rising, "Spider-Man?"

Peter stiffens — shifts, hopes it looks like a response to his physical discomfort and nothing else — and cocks an eyebrow. "Wait, you mean me?"

"Sir?" asks someone else, hushedly. "*Him?*"

"Hey!" says Peter. "I could be Spider-Man! You never know!"

"Indeed you never do," says Drew, coming around to crouch where Peter's facing. "I *trusted* you, Mikey."

"Dude, I was kidding about being Spider-Man," says Peter.

"Mmm, I'm not so sure about that, not so sure at all."

"Oh *I* see. You're like a crazy person."

Drew dangles a key in the air between them, then opens his fist and lets the keychain drop. Little plastic Spidey. Peter recognizes it immediately, and it's no mystery how Drew got it. He wonders about his old notebook, too. If they snooped closely enough, it's no wonder Drew got suspicious of him.

He wonders how they *found* him, though.

"If that's your idea of proof," says Peter, "then you must already know that I'm also the Hulk. I've got one of him on my apartment keys. You think you hate me now, you *really* won't like me when I get mad. Oh, and you might wanna check out this Uber driver I had the other week. He had a little Captain America dangling from his ignition."

"Oh, I see. So did this driver's car explode when you opened the door?"

"What?"

"Because that's what happened when my men found out what *this* key opened. *Good* men, Mikey. They didn't deserve that."

"Deserve what?"

"Do you know what the Brotherhood bylaws say we're supposed to do when a member uses our own knowledge against us?"

"Wait, you're saying it *blew up?*" Goddammit, Wade! All his stuff was in there! Why didn't Wade tell hi— oh, duh.

Drew rises, calmly draws back a loafer, and kicks Peter in the chin. It hurts his teeth and his neck, but he's been hit *way* harder.

At least, he thought so? The crack of his jaw seems to echo into the building space behind him.

"Oh *hell* the fuck no!"

The cry makes Peter smile, kind of in defiance of everything, just because he suddenly *can* smile.

The idiot never could quite manage to sneak up on him.

Wade tries to rub the grime off the window with his forearm, but only smears it around and gets his arm dirty in the process. He cups his hands around his eyes anyway and tries to see in. Except for bits of movement at a distance, there might as well be nothing there to see.

[Try a different window?]

[Say “screw it” and just break in guns a-blazin’?]

“Ehhh split the difference,” Wade says. He takes the back-wall fire escape a little higher, then halfway up he climbs precariously out onto the weird decorative ledge of paler-colored bricks toward the next window up.

[Not just weirdly decorative, but weirdly convenient, too!]

[Let’s just assume this gift horse has perfect pearly whites.]

[Whoa, watch the footing there! Sure could use some of those giant suction cups right about now...]

Being farther from the ground, this window isn’t filthy, just dirty, and he can actually see people-shapes through it — though from even farther away, it takes him a little minute to work out who’s where and what’s going on.

Petey’s on the ground. Wade recognizes his own shirt, and the shape Petey’s hair makes when he’s fallen sideways.

[Only WE’RE allowed to see him like that!]

[Not EVEN we’re allowed to see him like that anymore, remember?]

[OUR Shortbus!]

[Not ours anymore...]

[Our precious!]

[You drove him away.]

[OURS!!]

“Mine,” says Wade.

[You THREW him away.]

”Mine,” Wade insists. He pulls his bowie knife from its place along his thigh and starts wedging the windowpane open. The glass complains with whiny-cracking noises.

[What’s the point of being sneaky and coming in the hard way if they’re gonna hear us coming anyway? Just smash it and go!]

“Don’t wanna give ‘em a chance to scoop him up and make off with him.”

[You don’t know they’d do that.]

“I don’t know they wouldn’t.”

The glass pops out of its casing. At the same time a big old crack splits it across the far corner, making a loud crack that echoes both inside and outside the building.

And at the same time as *that*, inside the building some regular jackoff with a gross beard *kicks Petey in the face*. While he’s *lying there on the ground*.

“Oh HELL the fuck no!” Wade says, and drops in through the window.

His ankle twists when he lands on some kinda big obscure powertool he didn’t see in the shadows.

[Smooth move, ex-lax.]

Deadpool doesn’t need to be able to run *{or stand?}* to be able to shoot.

The rats scatter and take cover here and there.

He stops after a few rounds; the ankle’s giving him a wobble and he doesn’t want to miscalculate a ricochet or something with Petey on the ground in the middle of everything. “I’m coming, baby boy! You’re OK!” he says, in case Petey has a freakout from the sudden hail of bullets.

[Like it WON’T freak him out knowing they’re coming from you.]

{He WASN’T scared of us!}

[What if he thinks we’re coming to finish the job?]

“He won’t.” Wade ducks behind something big and metal and mechanical when the rats regroup and start to return fire. He checks the count in his magazine real quick. He tries to catch his breath a little, but that ankle *really* smarts.

{Yeah, it’s broken, genius.}

“Broken? No way.”

[Yes way.]

{Most heinous.}

“That might take a little longer.”

[Do we HAVE time?]

{Does HE?}

“If they just wanted to kill him we would’ve been too late a long time ago. There’s time.”

The barn-style door at the far end of the factory creaks open — Wade can see the top of it over the edge of the machinery he’s sheltered behind — and the place starts to fill with booted footsteps.

{What’s that you were saying about us having time?}

“Oh hey now, wait a minute,” he calls, “time out!”

The footsteps echo around the concrete and steel and brick, amplifying their numbers. Wade weighs the sounds against the acoustics of the terrain and does some quick math. Two dozen guys, tops. Unless he’s wrong.

[You could be wrong.]

That’s totally doable.

{Unless you’re wrong.}

Petey lying prone in the smack-dab middle is a helluva complicating factor, but if he frets a little less about shooting to not-kill...

The footsteps settle into place and a moment later a volley of gunfire opens in his direction. Metal rips and dents and screams; wires spark as they’re split; the window he was so careful to only crack the once ends up in shards that rain down; brick dust falls from the back wall and covers Wade in the kind of grit that reminds him of the time he broke into a crematorium and tripped.

“Some people have no respect for architecture!” Wade rests his back against the big metal thing and rolls his head side to side to try and loosen that bitch of a crick in his neck. “That’s it, fellas, waste all your ammo.” They comply nicely. He waits until a lull in the bang-bang, then just to be extra sure because Petey’s right there, doesn’t move until he hears the clickety-slidey-clack of empty clips being hastily ejected. Wade kicks his heel testingly against the floor — tender, but whole again.

He rises and steps into the open, mouth and guns firing at the same time. “My therapist says this obsession is unhealthy but if that were true I just couldn’t see myself bothering with schlepping my carcass all the way out here during dinnertime just to keep him safe, even on the presumption that he wouldn’t take me back.” Return fire pops; he rolls behind another machine, this one much smaller than the first. Bullets spark as they graze past the edges of the machine. “Oops. I mean it’s a raw deal for me in the short-term, but I’ve seen MUCH worse for way less of a good reason. I say it shows personal growth and selflessness, but I know I’m lying to myself. It’s not selfless at all. I want him alive for ME. The sick part is I don’t get to, like, HAVE him anymore, so I dunno — does that make it selfless? I’m just doing what I want because I wanna. I’m not doing it for the Brownie points or the warm fuzzies you’re supposed to get for being moral. Hell, he’s probably pissed off to see me. This ain’t nothin’ he couldn’t get out of himself. Do I have a white knight complex but like, where I’m the knight?”

[I am the night.]

“What was I saying?”

{Shut up. Listen.}

There’s a lot of grunting and a little bit of screaming coming from the other side of the machine.

[Sounds like you and Shortbus the other night.]

Wade looks at both his guns and how they’re not firing. Does that mean Petey is...?

He peeks around the machinery. Petey’s on his feet, handcuffs broken at the joint, grappling with three different men in kevlar. He cold-cocks one with both fists knotted, then gets bear-hugged from behind. He lifts both feet and *beautifully* kicks a dude under the chin, sending him crashing

skull to floor and knocking him out cold; he breaks the grip of the bear-hugger and then breaks one of his arms before slamming his head into a brick pillar and letting him drop.

Petey's nostrils flare; he looks *feral*.

Wade whoops. "*That's my Ace of Spides!*"

"Who said I'm yours?" Petey calls back.

"On second thought, I was not expecting you to even acknowledge me," yells Wade, "so I'm not really sure how to answer."

"Fight now, talk later!"

"Right, so, babe? Just so you know, not a single one of these motherfuckers is leaving alive after what they did to you, so if you're worried about your identity, y'know, don't."

"Wade, don't you dare!"

"Oops, little too late. Now I dunno what to tell you."

"How 'bout shutting up?" says the jackass who's trying to nail him with a shitty Walmart handgun from behind a big clonky factory machine.

Wade tsks and pops him in the neocortex when he leans around for another bad shot. "Excuse you. You're not a part of this conversation."

Petey doesn't seem to be a part of it anymore, either. To be fair, he is a little more distracted by the fight than Wade is, having only one life to live and all that.

[He's ENJOYING it, though. Aw, look at him go!]

Wade looks. He gets a bullet in the pancreas as reward.

{Think he's imagining that they're you?}

The guy Petey's fighting has a nose, and then he has Petey's fist, and then he doesn't seem to have a nose anymore because his face has been *flattened*. "Could be," Wade admits, and takes two to the kidney.

Two-to-the-kidney is worth it, though, if it means Wade gets to see him all feral and intense like this. Is this how big 'n' bad he is when he doesn't hold back?

[Or doesn't hold back as MUCH, anyway?]

{He could kill everyone in here with one blow a pop...}

[Saitama-sama!]

{...but you're the only one leaving bodies so far.}

[...So far. Have you ever seen that look in Shortbus' eyes before?]

Wade has not. He finds himself equal parts intimidated, aroused, and proud.

"*Cormorant!*" Petey's screaming. "Not an albatross! He's a cormorant!"

Petey does a friggin' *backflip* onto a machine and yells like primal scream therapy before kicking his way back into the mess. For a minute Wade can't see him over the much taller bad guys, especially not without the familiar bright blue-and-red to look for, but then he can see a little more light, a path clearing, as Spidey mows them down one way or another. He may not be killing, but he's definitely dooming a lot of people to eating through a straw and pooping in a bag for the rest of their days.

"Cormorant!" he keeps yelling. It sounds too happy to be a battle cry.

[He's so ENTHUSIASTIC.]

"Alright, well now I'm *fully* aroused," says Wade, pausing to take in Petey's uninhibited glory.

[Boi-oi-oi-oi-oi-ing!]

{No! Don't STOP now, you idi—}

Bang. Black.

{Hit the snooze, wouldja?}

[Can't. It's being performed live.]

{Probably about the only thing that is around here! Ba-dum tshh!}

[Who's singing?]

Wade's pretty sure he's never come back from the dead accompanied by a fucking *a capella* soundtrack.

[Except that once with that creepy scientist. But he was only singing to be even creepier, so that doesn't count. This sounds more like sad-'n'-lonesome campfire singing?]

{Which creepy scientist?}

[Eh, who can keep track.]

{WHY are they singing? You never know what kind of zany shenanigans are gonna go on around us while we're dead, but it doesn't usually make circumstances MORE pleasant. And last time we were conscious, people were screaming. Not singing.}

[Proceed with fucking caution.]

Wade scowls without opening his eyes. *Shut up*, he thinks. *I'll take any change of fucking pace I can get. 'Sides, it sounds nice. Little wobbly, but. Y'know. Nice.*

[Everything else is quiet at least. Fight's over.]

{We still in the factory?}

[Call Shyamalan, I smell dead people.]

{Dated.}

[You mean ‘classic’.]

Did we win? Wade thinks.

[We died. So let’s go with a big fat NO on that one.]

Wait no but if they *lost* then... Fuck. Fuck fuck fuckfuckshitfuckshit where the fuck is Petey?

{That... that IS Petey...}

Wade listens for a minute.

Yeah. Yeah, okay, yeah, that’s Petey. Petey’s okay. Petey’s alive and okay enough to sing. The coronary event Wade was about to have subsides into anxious palpitations.

...Hey, Wade thinks. *You didn’t call him Shortbus.*

{...}

[He’d sound better if he sang with more confidence. Or if he, y’know, sat up straighter. Can’t breathe right all curled up on himself like that. It’s all about the diaphragm.]

{No one asked for your opinion.}

”...and nothin’ good out there won’t be yours,” Petey sings into the dark. His voice echoes back.
”Sometimes the blues is just a passin’ bird, and why can’t that always be? Tossin’ a sigh from your birch’s crown, just enough dark to see how you’re the light over me.”

{He sounds... perfect.}

[...]

“Hey,” says Wade.

Petey twists around, looks down at him. A stray thread of hair falls onto his forehead, sticks to the bloody spot there. Wade wants to grab a giant cosmic pencil eraser and rub that spot out of existence. Petey shouldn’t have bloody spots. Ever. Not anymore.

He should never have that kind of hollow, black look hiding behind his eyes, either, but Wade doesn’t think a cosmic eraser would do the trick for that.

“You should sing for a *live* audience sometime,” says Wade. “Your art deserves to be appreciated. I’d applaud but I can’t move my arms yet.”

Petey fidgets with something in his lap — Wade’s mask; Petey must’ve pulled it off after Wade died and if he were *anyone* else he’d die himself for the act — and he keeps on looking blank. Blank and bleak and flat. Like the colorist forgot to add any highlights on this page, only shading. Wade doesn’t like that, no sir he doesn’t. Unprofessional, is what that is. Petey needs highlights, he *deserves* highlights, and sparkles and Photoshop lens flares and anime backgrounds full of floating pink bubbles and—

“I threw up,” Petey says, and his voice is blank and flat, too.

[Is he doing a weak-ass “Jurassic Park” bit?]

{No. He totally barfed. You can smell it.}

[Can't really smell ANYthing over all the piss and shit and sweat and blood and lacerated entrails and—]

{Yeah, okay, fight scenes smell like ass, MOST people would puke, we get it.}

Wade turns his head as far as it will go, which isn't very. Group of bodies in the dim, streaks of blood where they've been dragged into a not-so-tidy line. Whoever did the dragging failed to finish the task. Most of the dudes are still lying as they evidently fell. Wade can count twenty-one. He's not sure if that's enough to account for how many bad guys there were at the outset.

[SOMEone wasn't counting.]

He can't tell how many of them, if any, are breathing.

{Sure, Shortbus was in some kinda state, but he wasn't THAT far gone.}

[Or was he?]

He would never. He's Spider-Man.

[It'd be a \$#^& good reason for him to throw up, though.]

Wade could ask him.

{Don't ask him. NEVER ask him. If he has something to tell us, he'll just say it.}

"How you feeling?" asks Petey.

"Me?! You kiddin'? Peachy keen. Tip-top o' the mornin'. How else would I feel?" says Wade.

"You, though... Petey y-you —"

"Thank you," says Petey. And he turns away again. The nerves reconnect in one of Wade's arms, and he reaches out, but Petey's sitting just out of range, back hunched. He's kinda rocking himself the way people do when they're having a nervous breakdown, but overall he doesn't seem especially breakdown-ish (more dissociation-ish), so Wade figures it's another thing that means something different for Petey than it does for other people. "Thank you so, *so much*, for..."

He doesn't finish the sentence. And, even though there's literally *no fucking reason* for Petey to be *thanking* him when he has every right to be punching him in the face instead, Wade isn't gonna press him for clarification.

[Pussy.]

{Oh, like YOU haven't been whipped from the start.}

[Pot, kettle.]

{That's exactly the point, ya dingus.}

"I think," says Wade, "I mean I *know* I owe you a tremendous sack of apologies, right." He pauses to swallow a busted tooth and a swill of blood. That'll lead to some interesting shits later. "But — and this is maybe kinda selfish of me but hear me out for a hot second okay — I feel like it would probably go over better with you if I do my groveling in a slightly more romantic or at least

significantly less dead-people-ish setting, so...”

The words evaporate from Wade’s open mouth when Petey looks at him again, only half-turning this time, most of his face obscured by shoulder.

Holy shit does that boy even know how beautiful he is. Does he even KNOW.

{JFC, he’s even perfect when he has bloody spots.}

[How the #&% does he DO that?]

{SO not fair.}

[We’re in SO much trouble.]

“So uh...” Wade tries. He waggles his eyebrows. “Your place or mine?”

A beat, then Petey smiles halfway and laughs one of those laughs that’s just an exhale through the nose. “You’re such a dork,” he says, looking away.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: It's okay to not be okay.

Ugly Love

Chapter Summary

In which it's Peter's turn to tend the wounded, rubber duckie is the one, and the author doesn't know shit about shit at this point.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It isn't far from here to home, according to Wade. Benefits of owning property smack dab in the middle of classic "secondary location" territory. Peter's legs are anxious with (a truly astonishing amount of) leftover energy so a walk doesn't actually sound too bad. Plus he wants to clear the scene before the cops arrive — which should be pretty soon, since he put in the call on a burner he found in one of Wade's pouches and that was a while ago.

Wade's no good to walk yet, though. Peter tries carrying him bridal-style, but there's so much *of* Wade that it's impossible for Peter to see the ground in front of him — and apparently Spidey-sense, having done more important things tonight, is tired and doesn't feel it's worthwhile to keep Peter from tripping, stumbling, or stubbing his toes. What an irritatingly unreliable superpower.

"I didn't want to do it like this," he says by way of apology as he webs Wade's limbs into a fetal position and adds two loops that stretch from Wade's shoulder blades to hips, then puts him on like a backpack, back to back. "Does anything hurt?"

"Only my everything..." Wade says from somewhere behind Peter's head.

"I mean is this alright?"

Wade struggles a little, gives up. "As long as you remember my safeword."

"'Cable's out'," Peter recites.

"Damn right," Wade mutters.

Someday Peter will ask him what it means, since it clearly means *something*. He has this weird impression that Wade used to date a cable guy or something. Whatever. For now he's just happy to still remember it correctly, since Wade has never made use of it in context, and they could stand to drill it more often.

The rest of the walk is quiet, except when Peter stops once in a while and turns around to face Wade front and ask which way to go next or how much farther.

He resolutely does not think about *anything* that's happened today. The effort gives him a headache, and the headache gives him a foul mood until the building comes into sight.

Wade's factory squat is an unlit, spray-painted hulk of tetanus edges and familiarity. He really thought, for a little while, that he'd never see it again.

Peter forces the door. Goal at hand, he doesn't have the patience for more civilized modes of entry.

The padlock explodes a little bit.

“I have a key, y’know,” Wade says. He doesn’t sound upset.

“You lost it already.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Am I wrong though?”

“...That’s not the point.”

Peter takes him directly to the bathroom and sets him down on the toilet lid. He pulls at the webs that are keeping Wade folded up into a parcel. The suit rips when he yanks.

“Yyyeeow.”

“Did you mean to say ‘yeehaw’?”

“Nope. That stung.”

“Sorry. Alright. Literally ripping your suit off your body is hot in concept only,” Peter says, agreeably enough he thinks. “Duly noted.”

Wade is still curled up even though nothing’s holding him in that position anymore. Maybe his muscles are stiff. “Could we maybe keep sexy times and recovering-from-death times compartmentalized?”

Oops. “Also noted.”

“Thank you.” His voice is even smaller than his words. Peter’s tempted to order Wade to append a “sir” onto the end of them, but that wouldn’t be compartmentalizing, would it. God, what is *wrong* with him?

Okay okay, starting now.

He helps Wade out of the rest of his suit in a more conventional way. There’s nothing to be done for his injuries but to brush away the bits of gravel and — Peter doesn’t remember any windows breaking, so how does he *always* manage to get broken glass in — wipe off the dirt. Wade sits still and hunched, rigidly, smiling softly to himself but not with his eyes, which are fixed on the edge of the tub.

Peter sits back on his haunches for a quiet moment in search of what else to do — anything that might help — and when his gaze brushes past the shower knobs he feels like he could do with a shower. Well then, so probably could Wade.

Or something less demanding, Peter thinks as he starts the water at the base tap and trails his fingers in it, waiting for it to get warm. A bath. He pulls up the little lever that closes the inside of the drain, then grabs the rubber plug and fits it in with a twist. The drainplug is bright lilac and vaguely flower-shaped. He’s always noticed it sitting on the corner of the tub, but never thought about what it’s *for*.

Never thought about Wade taking a bath, for aching muscles or suffering skin or a need for comfort or just because he wants to and why not. Now he imagines Wade using bath bombs, soaking in scented water dyed purple or green, with a bottle of red wine and an issue of *Guns and*

Ammo.

Wade looks up as the tub starts to fill and the sound of falling water changes pitch. He sneaks a hand up and scratches his jaw. “S-soap,” he says, hesitantly, as one who’s afraid to ask. “Under the sink.”

Peter finds it in a big white bottle with a pale green cap. The label says it’s for washing babies. He doesn’t need to ask. The inflamed redness of Wade’s exposed skin has already answered his question. He squeezes some into the water, then some extra, because it smells like chamomile. A bath like a cup of calming tea. Uncle Iroh would approve so hard.

Wade closes his eyes while they wait. His face is still averted. They breathe the steam. The tremendous bruising on the left side of Wade’s face (the flesh of which had been significantly *gone* when Wade first woke up after the fight) has mellowed to yellow by the time the tub has filled and Peter cranks the water off.

For a bit Wade doesn’t move except to look up at Peter from under his brows.

“Come on now,” says Peter, reaching out an offering hand. “I didn’t run it for me.”

Wade blinks and — Peter hardly spares a moment to think Wade had believed exactly the opposite, that the bath *was* for Peter and not for him, as if Peter would be *that* selfish — accepts the hand up. Getting him out of his boxers and into the tub is fine and well, save a brief moment when Wade lifts the first foot and overbalances a little, but Peter is already there to steady him.

“My favorite place to be, besides up high with the wind,” Peter says softly.

“Hm? Whassat?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Wade seems content to not worry about anything but lowering himself into the water. He yelps in his throat when his ass touches the steaming bubbly surface.

“Too hot?”

“No it’s *perfect*,” says Wade. Once settled, a beat passes, and a little too loudly he asks “Join me?”

What happened to compartmentalizing? Peter thinks but doesn’t say. A shared bath wouldn’t necessarily be something sexual. “I don’t think there’s room,” he says instead.

“...There’s always room for Jello.”

“Did the boxes tell you to say that?”

Wade drops his chin. “No, but they did say it first and I just repeated,” he admits. “Would you... still... be here later, if I admitted to you now that I steal all my best material?”

“That and at least one heart?”

“Whassat?”

“I said sure, I think I could live with that.”

Wade grimaces. “Just as long as you don’t see me as any less of a man.”

“Never. Here’s your rubber duckie.”

Wade squeaks it sardonically before kissing its head with genuine affection and floating it between fluffy mountains of soapy froth.

Peter puts his sleeves up to the elbows and squeezes the loofah-poofy-thing under the water, the turquoise one (Peter’s is the lavender one), sponges it up over Wade’s back while Wade sits very still, clearly not expecting the treatment and not sure how to react. He looks like he wants to move away but doesn’t. Peter stops, uncertain.

Their shared breathing echoes off the tiles. The water doesn’t make a sound; Wade is sitting too perfectly still.

“A duck’s quack actually *does* have an echo,” Peter blurts. “It’s just that its soundwaves are almost identical to the actual quack so our ears can’t tell the difference.”

Wade looks at him.

Peter hands him the sudsy poofy sponge thing and makes jazz hands under the water to rinse them.

“When one feels like a duck,” Wade says, “one is happy.”

He doesn’t sound happy.

Peter tries to smile, and Wade tries to smile back, and Peter stands up. “I’m going to go order some food so hopefully it’ll be here by the time you’re done. Call for me if you need anything,” he says, wiping his hands on a towel. “And if you slip and hurt yourself all over again getting out of the tub because you didn’t call me for help, I’ll be very annoyed. So think hard about how you’re really doing before you try to stand up on your own.”

Wade opens his mouth to say something, but when Peter pauses with his hand on the door and an open ear, he doesn’t say anything. So Peter shuts the door behind him and goes looking for a one of the many burner phones. (Wade must get them by the case, in a “fell off a truck” kind of way.) Wade’ll feel better with a full stomach. He always does — or he always *seems* to, rather. Peter feels like it’s important, especially right now, to remember the difference and be mindful of it. Wade’s pretty fragile, for such a big, supposedly tough, scary merc.

Peter doesn’t think they can afford any more misunderstandings between them just yet.

The phone Peter finds has a lockscreen image of a seagull shitting in midair. The burners always have a passcode of one-one-one-one-etc. because Wade doesn’t trust himself to remember anything else.

Peter puts in both their usual orders for Thai on DoorDash but has to stop there because he doesn’t have a card number for Wade, or a positive account balance on his own card. He sets the phone face-up on the kitchen counter and sets Netflix to a random *Voyager* episode, volume low so he can keep one ear open toward the bathroom.

It turns out to be the Tuvix episode. He purposely doesn’t pay close attention to it; he’s not emotionally prepared to accept that kind of ethical drama. And according to Wikipedia it was initially supposed to be such a lighthearted, campy episode, too. Not the moral-horror version of Gem fusion.

Funny how these things can happen. How things can turn dark so quickly even with the sweetest intentions.

He wants to knock on the bathroom door to ask Wade where he can find a card number, but hesitates, caught between wanting to give Wade some space and wanting to feed him as soon as possible. He can hear water moving slowly behind the closed door. A couple of muffled duckie-squeaks.

He opts for space. It seems like less of a gamble. Wade still wants him — Peter *knows* — but that doesn't mean Peter shouldn't tread carefully on the heels of such poor judgment from him. He isn't sure how long it takes Wade to recover from being that particular kind of Confused, the kind that makes him scary and impossible to read. Nor is he sure one way or another how dying might affect that recovery. Scary Wade is not a force to mess around with, or to try predicting.

Not that Peter had felt particularly fearful. Spidey-sense may be tired today but it's not *broken* — it worked just fine during the fight, and that was after getting chloroformed — and it would've warned him if there'd been any reality to a threat like the one Wade made.

It was more the fact that Wade was upset enough *to* threaten him, to be so far gone that doing something like *that* could possibly look like a good idea. Peter's never seen Wade at his worst or anywhere near it, he knows that, but he guesses this was a small taste. The flavor's got him worried.

And not for himself, whatever the sense there is in that.

A Wade of questionable stability, he decides, is a Wade in need of care above all. He hopes he's not wrong. He'll need to reevaluate a large chunk of his worldview if he's wrong, one in which Wade plays a central role.

Peter wonders when it was that Wade came to have such a starring role in his life. Wonders, as in he's curious to know, but also as in it fills him with a kind of wonder. He wouldn't trade it, he knows that much.

He doesn't realize how hard he's listening for Wade until his ears physically twitch at the sound of the drain sucking down bathwater. He gets up and pads over to the bathroom door, ready to be called for. He hears the soft scrape of terrycloth fabric over rough skin and knows that Wade won't call for him. It's good that Wade's feeling strong enough to finish with the bathroom on his own, obviously, but on a selfish level Peter feels a little disappointed that his aid isn't needed. (Yet another prime example of *what is wrong with him?*)

He goes into the bedroom and plucks Wade's softest hoodie from the closet, spreads it on the corner of the bed nearest the door, with a pair of Tony the Tiger lounge pants and some clean underwear. It isn't a sure thing — Wade might reject the clothing selection out of pride or protest or sheer contrariness — but it's something Peter can offer. One less set of choices for Wade to need to make. Decision-making is exhausting for a brain, and Wade's seems to need a lot of R&R right now.

Peter backs off and stands in the kitchen. Wade doesn't sing in the shower, but he does tend to sing afterwards, because he's funny like that. Or maybe it's because he feels good after cleaning off. Peter should ask him sometime. But he's not singing today.

Peter can't blame him for not feeling up to it.

But it's an interruption, a conspicuous break from Normal, and aren't they dealing with enough of that already?

"*I can't look at the rocket launch,*" Peter sings for him from the kitchen. "*The trophy wives of the*

astronauts. And I won't listen to their words, 'cause I like... birds."

At the bathroom door, he hears Wade brushing his teeth. Peter wonders if death leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

"I don't care for walking downtown. Crazy autocar gonna mow me down. Look at all the people like cows in a herd. Well I like... birds." The brushing pauses while he sings, then continues at the end of the verse. Peter pictures him smiling. It might be naïve imagination. *"If you're smaaall and on a search, I've got a feeder for you to perch on..."*

It isn't a long song, and it's over long before Wade steps out of the bathroom and heads to the bedroom to find the clothes laid out for him. He just stands there and stares at them for a while, naked except for a towel, before closing the door behind him. Peter turns the tv off and goes back to the kitchen again, something about his intention for food drawing him there even though delivery comes by the door, not the fridge.

Wade comes out hugging his arms in the clothes Peter picked. He only makes eye contact for a second but that's all the time it takes to make Peter feel like his heart muscles are dying.

"I tried to order food," Peter blurts, pulling the commandeered phone from his pocket and holding it out. "But then I remembered I'm broke."

Wade takes the phone from him, careful to avoid fingers brushing and careful with the phone as if it could crumble apart in his hands, slowly unlocks the screen, and completes the checkout without looking to see what Peter chose from the menu. Then he passes the phone back as if it belonged to Peter.

Peter returns it to his pocket, unsure what else to do with it. Maybe it does belong to him now. Wade's funny like that sometimes, with gifts, but Peter's as reluctant to presume as he is to protest, so he'll just play along until he knows.

"How are you?" Peter asks, because *Are you okay?* would just be rude at this point.

Wade shrugs.

"You're not saying much," Peter says.

Another shrug. More silence.

"Are the boxes saying anything?" Peter asks, angling for a different tactic.

"Always," says Wade.

"Can I get a hint?" Because quiet! Wade is more than a little nerve-wracking, especially right now. Peter would like to know what it is they're working with.

Wade shakes his head. "It isn't anything good, Petey. It almost never is."

No kidding. "Are they saying you don't deserve clean clothes or fresh food?" he tries.

Wade tears his eyes away from the floor.

"Or me?" Peter asks, feeling presumptuous despite the likelihood of being correct.

And the eyes go right back to the floor again, sharply this time. "Well *now* they are," he says very, very quietly.

“Sorry.” Peter looks at the wall for a little minute. “Before I go giving them any more bright ideas,” he says, “maybe you could tell me some of what you were thinking — or some of what they were saying — that led to that... thing, that uh. Incident, earlier? I think it’s only fair that I get a chance to know what the signs are, for future reference, maybe even a chance to make counterarguments.”

“Can’t argue with crazy, Petey.”

“But it did make sense to you at the time?”

“...Perfect sense.”

“And that was?”

Wade looks past him and takes a deep breath. “That you were so damaged by everything you’ve been through in the past six months or so that you needed to use someone else to drown out all the bad but instead of helping you get better I was only making you worse and leading you down a pathology of addiction and dependence which would eventually weaken you and become your undoing both physically and spiritually.”

Peter blinks. Oh, is *that* all. “And,” he says, carefully, “do you still believe that?”

It takes Wade a moment to answer. “I don’t know. Pete, you don’t get it, I—“ He stops himself.

“Help me to get it.”

Wade just looks at Peter’s knees.

Peter suppresses a sigh. “I’m tired,” he says. “And I know you’re tired. Can we sit down, d’you think?”

Wade rocks his weight back and forth for a minute before unfolding his arms and heading over to the couch. Peter follows, trying to decode all the differences in Wade’s bearing and movements, unable to come up with something more specific than Not Good.

Wade breathes out slowly through his nose as Peter lowers himself to the floor in front of the couch and leans back against it. He figures that sitting side by side might be too much for Wade to safely handle right now.

He doesn’t *think* Wade would be bothered by kid-glove treatment, now or any other time. Hell, normally he’s more likely to revel in the attention — except right now, when reveling in anything must be too far out of reach.

In a low tone that doesn’t carry much hope, Wade says, “Can I pet your hair?”

Peter solemnly runs his fingers along the edge of the tv remote without turning it on. The lid over the battery compartment is missing. He sighs. “That’s... that’s still a standing ‘yes’,” he says.

“Oh.” A beat. “I wasn’t sure. I just... I wasn’t *sure*.”

“Yeah. I know that feeling,” says Peter, a little pointedly. He turns the tv back on and scrolls through movie options and silently makes the executive decision that they’re watching *Porco Rosso* (in the original Japanese, with subtitles). The first scene plays all the way through before Wade’s fingers finally, *finally* find their cautious way to the spot behind Peter’s ear. He closes his eyes and leans into it (*god* he missed that; how did he come to miss it so much in such a short time?

does the belief that he'll never get to experience something again make that much of a difference?) but, despite the encouragement, Wade's hand remains hesitant.

Peter reaches up and rests his own hand on Wade's forearm, just rests it there, and softly runs his thumb-pad back and forth over the texture. Wade makes a noise like he's trying to remember how to breathe.

"It's okay," says Peter.

"No it fucking isn't."

Ah, here it comes. "Yes. It is."

"No." Wade jerks his other hand at the tv. "I'm a pig, too."

"You're not a pig," says Peter. "You're a Wade."

"What's a four-letter word for *pig*."

"Boar," says Peter. "Also not you."

"See also: selfish fuckin' prick who twists things so he can take his inferiority issues out on the man he loves because he's a fuckin' *monster*."

"Again: not you."

Wade pinwheels his fists around in a fit before gesturing sharply to himself and then holding his hands open as if presenting evidence.

"You're not a monster," Peter insists.

"Oh please. The shit I've done? Give someone a choice between me and a dracula and they'll take the dracula every damn time, and I don't mean the sparkly teen-heartthrob kind, I mean, like, the old-school Voldemort-lookin' Nosferatu type creeps. A dracula only kills people 'cause they're hungry. I've met draculas who run *hospitals*. I'm more of a monster than a *literal monster*."

"I call bullshit."

Wade just looks at him. Witheringly.

"Okay," Peter relents, "so you did some shit. You did some monstrous shit. Fine. It's not like you chose to be—"

"Just because it ain't my *fault* I became a monster doesn't make me any less of one."

Peter's quiet for a little while.

"If you were really the hellspawn you think you are," says Peter, "then I wouldn't be here right now." He pauses. "And I mean both literally *here*-here, and also 'here' in the existential sense. I'd be dead, and I would've died alone."

Wade sits up, the movement almost like a form of violence in itself. "I put a *gun* to your *head*, Spider-Pete."

"You weren't going to fire."

“You don’t know that.”

This time Peter gives *him* a look.

“Okay,” Wade says after a second, and he’s rolling his eyes as if admitting it with a straight face would be too painful. “Okay *maybe* it was unloaded and the safety was on. That doesn’t make it okay.”

“No,” agrees Peter, “it doesn’t. You didn’t hurt me, but you still *hurt* me, you know? And I fully expect you to *never* pull that kind of stunt again. You know what, though? It doesn’t *matter* anymore. Because I *forgave* you already.”

Wade flips over and jumps off the couch. Actually jumps, clear over the back of it like he’s vaulting a fence. (*Glad to see you’re feeling better*, Peter thinks but doesn’t say.) To Wade’s credit, he manages not to run away altogether. From halfway across the living room he starts laughing, hands on his knees, and shaking his head. “You can’t do that,” he says.

“Too late.”

“No. No, you *can’t* forgive already, because I haven’t even *apologized* yet.”

Peter snorts. “So? Get on with it already. We’re missing the movie.”

(The movie’s paused. Wade glances at the dimmed screen and gives Peter a masked look.) (He’s not wearing the mask.)

Deflating, Wade fumps to the floor, ankles crossed and knees high, grips his head between his hands. “Jesus Mary Jehoosefat Jiminy fucking Cricket, you...” He wheezes out another laugh. “Why are you so...”

“However you’re planning to finish that question,” says Peter, “the answer is *that’s just who I am.*”

He keeps laughing for a little while, low and unhinged. “*God* I love you,” he says.

Peter grins. “Ah, so my voodoo doll is working after all,” he snickers, and gets up. Wade doesn’t look up as he walks over, so Peter crouches, manually removes Wade’s hands from his head and lifts his face.

Wade turns his head to the side. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” says Peter.

“Just. Don’t.”

“I don’t know what you’re asking here, Wade.”

A long sigh. “Don’t just write this off.”

“Oh, I’m not.” Peter headtilts. “Do you understand the concept of forgiveness?” he asks. “And I don’t mean that sarcastically.”

Wade just scoffs.

Peter drops from his crouch, sits cross-legged on the chilly floor. Runs a hand through his hair, then leaves his hand on the back of his neck. “Okay look,” he says. “I get why you’re so convinced that I’m traumatized. Okay? I get it. I’m gullible as fuck and I’m an easy mark and right after

hitting rock bottom I walked straight into a place *designed* to brainwash vulnerable people, and then there was that whole thing at the factory and... Yeah, it wasn't really my idea of fun. But seriously? I'm pretty much an expert on resisting brainwashing, and I'm *used* to people gaslighting me and trying to convince me that they know better than I do when I know — I *know* — there's no way in hell that they do. That they *could*. Learning to resist that, navigating around it, playing along when necessary — those are just survival skills for me. And I mean like *day-to-day* survival. Peter Parker survival, not Spider-Man survival." He laughs. "Honestly, getting inducted into a literal cult is just a slightly different flavor of the same exact crap people have tried to feed me my whole life. I knew what I was walking into from the get-go, in general if not in detail. I took the good because I could, and I played along with the bad until I got what I needed to take them down. Deep undercover. That's all."

Wade grumbles something about undercover work getting the better of seasoned agents.

"That's them. This is me." Peter leans back on his hands and cants his head to the side. "I'm kind of smart sometimes," he adds with a half-smile, "in case you hadn't noticed."

That gets Wade to laugh, but it sounds forced. "You're still dumb enough to hang out with a crooked wad of rat shit like me," he says.

Peter twists his mouth in irritation, then leans forward and clonks his forehead against Wade's, not very gently. "Cut the shit, Wilson."

"Okay first, *ow*, and second, I'm actually being serious."

"Yeah, I know," says Peter. "Your self-esteem or lack thereof has managed to convince you that the only reason I could *possibly* want to fuck you day and night is because I'm fucked up from all the shit I've been through lately. Well, guess what, asshole. I don't use sex as a coping mechanism —" *Liar*, whispers his brain — "and I don't use other people for escapism and, oh hey, lookie, I like you *because I like you*. Completely independently of whatever trauma I may or may not have ended up with."

"You weren't—" Wade pauses, glances sideways at Peter, as if hoping to be interrupted.

Oh he is *so* not getting off the hook that easily. Peter waits, expectantly.

"You weren't so... I dunno... *touchy-feely* before you got yourself... Not Brainwashed."

"Actually except for the sex I kind of *was*," says Peter. "Or — actually, you know, I dunno, maybe not. Not to the same extent? Maybe you're right. Maybe I still had a few more reservations, or something. I dunno. Still expecting you to give up and walk out like every other fucking person who wasn't obligated to stay in my life. Or expecting you to hold my touch-needs against me somehow. And... hey, here's a theory, maybe those fears are kind of *gone* now, okay? At least where you, specifically, are concerned."

"Dude, you literally ran away because you finally figured out that I wanted sex."

"No, I ran away because I thought that was *all* you wanted. We've been over this. I no longer think you're trying to use me, I no longer think you're going to ditch me, I... I *trust* you, okay? It's actually causing me physical pain to say it so you know it's true. Because instead of stomping around demanding my trust, you just do what you do, and I've made my own call. Hell, you keep trying to shove me out the door now, and I *know* it's not because you don't actually want me here. Yeah, okay, I screw up bad sometimes, I'm an asshole sometimes, I need help with stuff people don't usually need help with, but even outside of Spider-Man I'm a *hell* of a lot stronger than you

might think based on those things. I may be... I dunno, *differently functional* I guess, but I'm not *broken*. And even if I were? Wade, I'd never... Never."

Wade doesn't say anything, doesn't look at him, just sits still and listens and digests and lets Peter pluck and pull at the fraying edges of a rip in his shirt, the gaping rip on his forearm. The revealed skin beneath it is battered but isn't frayed, is *whole*, and *god* Peter wishes Wade could think of that skin the way Peter does, just for a minute.

Peter suppresses an impulse to press his lips to that skin, then suppresses a gulping feeling in his stomach. "Y... you're not a bottle of vodka, Wade. I don't touch you to *forget*. Okay? I touch you because I want to, all on my own. Big-boy pants and everything. Because — be — because I *care* about you. A lot. Like, a *lot*-a lot. Like, it kind of *hurts* how much I care about you, okay? And I'm actually pretty terrified about it, okay? So maybe could you *not* make light of that, or brush it off as a *symptom*? ...Also there's — you — do you ever just *look* at yourself? Do you ever — I mean, look, you're a brick shithouse with a texture I can't keep my hands off of and a voice that makes the back of my neck tingle and you make me as horny as a rabbit on Viagra. So there's that, too, if you need a reason for me to want you. And it's... it's really not any more complicated than that. Okay? I promise. It's just — that's all it is. I just want you. ...Okay?"

Wade looks down, hums a few tuneless notes to himself. They are low notes. They make the air vibrate like a motorcycle engine.

After a minute he turns over the arm Peter's been fidgeting with, turns it palm up, takes a gentle grip on the underside of Peter's forearm, and that grip feels like it wants to cling a lot tighter. "Heh," says Wade, almost but not quite looking up at him. "Well that's just super. For a second there I thought you were totally falling for me."

Peter tries to grin, but he knows it comes out too shy-looking. He doesn't really care, though. He looks at the ceiling. "Well you know, I'm not a philosopher and I don't have a whole lot of experience with that kind of thing," he says, "but I don't really see how there's any appreciable difference between *that* and what I just described."

That gets Wade to finally look at him properly. Victory. "Huh," he says, in the I-never-thought-about-it-like-that-before voice. He puts a hand on Peter's shoulder, trying to rest it there, but he keeps nervously tightening and loosening his grip like he wants to drag Peter closer and check for broken bones. What little confidence he was beginning to show again drops away pretty quickly. "Just," he says. "I just need to know you're *okay*, Petey. Y'know? Me and reality have this kinda on-again-off-again soap-opera relationship and it's riddled with trust issues and an amnesia subplot every six months so I don't tend to put too much emphasis on *needing to know* things, but — but just this one thing. Just th— I *need to know you're okay*."

Peter shuts his eyes a minute and breathes carefully through his nose. Then he makes a decision. "Alright," he says, shifting back. "You really want me to do this allistic-style, with the coded language and everything, I can make that happen. This time. But for the record, I think it's completely inadequate and I like my way better, so don't get used to it."

He clinically works himself down onto Wade's lap, puts his legs loosely around Wade's hips and arms loosely around Wade's shoulders. He steadies his gaze at the spot between Wade's eyes. Peter could more than manage "real" eye contact right now, he's sure of it, but that's not *him*, and even though this is kind of a performative version of communication, it still needs to come from *him*. He thinks better of the arm situation and takes Wade's face in his hands instead, careful not to cover his ears because they both need Wade to *hear this* loud and freaking clear:

"Wade, I'm not acting weird and showing you affection and wanting to have sex with you because

there's anything wrong with me. I'm not saying there's *not* necessarily anything wrong with me, but if there is, it has nothing to do with *this*. I'm doing *this* because I'm in love with you, dumbass. And I'm not just 'okay', I'm *happy*. You *make* me happy. *Because I'm in love with you.*" He's about to keep talking but has to stop because his mouth doesn't want to do anything but smile all of a sudden. It feels like a dopey smile, too big for his face, and it's just a little embarrassing. That's how he knows he's said exactly enough.

Wade's mouth hasn't moved at all, is still expressionless, but Peter can tell he's got the same dopey smile, somehow, anyway. It just hasn't reached the surface yet.

"Get it now?" Peter asks through his big stupid grin, stroking his fingers down the sides of Wade's face, which slowly comes back to life under the encouragement.

Wade's big dopey smile has got to be at least twice as shiny as Peter's. "Got it."

"Good," Peter says with a smirk. "Now *deal with it*, tough guy."

"Them's fightin' words," says Wade, and that's the only warning Peter gets before Wade's arms are a full circle around him, and Wade's knees hike up off the floor, throwing Peter forward into his chest, throwing their mouths together. The aim is off but they course-correct. Totally professional.

Peter doesn't ask for any tongue and Wade offers none, but the kiss is full and warm and *complete*.

Wade breaks off suddenly, eyes scrunched shut. "*Nope*, wait nope wrong. I still haven't apologized."

"You stopped kissing me for *that*?" Peter rolls his eyes and drags him in close again. Wade resists, but Peter's super-strength isn't taking no for an answer. He pulls them flush again, ignoring the whine of protest. "Well then?" he whispers against Wade's neck. "Let's hear it. I'm not going anywhere for a while, and neither are you. If you want to apologize so bad, fine. But personally? I don't really care what you say as long as you say *something* to me, and say my name a lot too, and touch me while you're doing it."

He tries (and fails) not to chuckle with self-satisfaction when Wade's struggles melt into a shudder. Too-warm hands start roaming Peter's back, forcing creases into the fabric of his hoodie and smoothing them out again. Wade buries his face in Peter's shoulder, and Peter holds Wade's head there with a light touch.

They breathe together.

Wade lifts his head and searches Peter's face for something he doesn't seem to find. "Petey I'm so sorry," he says, still searching. "There's no excuse for hurting you. If I could go back and punch myself in the spleen I would."

"Luckily for you that won't be necessary," says Peter, snaking his arms up inside the warmth of Wade's shirt. "I already told you I forgive you. I'm really, really ready to just have a happy story together with you now, please and thank you."

"Only too happy to oblige."

The kiss lasts until there's a tentative knock on the door for food delivery, and a bit longer after that.

They eat shoulder-to-shoulder and hip-to-hip on the couch while bright, inviting Miyazaki colors

wash across their faces. Bellies full, they doze through the lengthy climax sequence of the movie, propped up against each other.

Peter rouses a bit while the score plays over the end credits, digs the remote out of the cushions and turns the tv off, and carries Wade to bed, holding him one-handed while he pulls back the covers. Wade mutters as Peter lays him down, then settles into quiet as Peter snuggles in behind him and kisses the back of his neck. “Night, Petey,” he mumbles.

“Good night, Wade. Be good for me from now on.”

“Mm... ‘Kay.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: The last one! FLUFF AND FLUFF AND SMUT AND FLUFF.

Beautiful Freak

Chapter Summary

In which other characters trot across the screen like a flippin' curtain call, Wade is the most awkward of romantics, and the author finally makes good his promise of a happy ending.

Chapter warnings: Smut. See end notes for smut-specific tags.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So why’s Spidey a... howdja say it? Curmudgeon?”

“Cormorant,” says Peter. He looks down at their feet, walking in time with each other, and smiles.

“Yeah, so tell me about that.”

“They’re these big heavy fish-eating water birds that suck at flying but are great at diving. They’re strongest in the water, even though their feathers aren’t even waterproof and they have to dry off at sunset every day so they don’t freeze at night, and their bodies float super low in the water because they’re not made for it like ducks are, but they’re still really strong and intense swimmers...”

“So Spidey is strongest in a difficult and foreign element?”

“Basically.”

Wade looks up at the sun breaking through clouds, face pinched in thought. “Yeah,” he says eventually. “Yeah, I could see that. I like that way more than the albatross anyway.”

Peter loops his arm through Wade’s and touches his head to Wade’s shoulder as they enter the building. The elevator spits them out on a familiar floor and they help themselves to coffee.

They’re not alone, though.

Wade tried to refuse to join Peter in answering Tony’s insistent, but-you-*promised* invitation to the Tower and now Peter’s starting to wonder if that wasn’t the right choice. Clint won’t stop staring at them.

“I thought I didn’t get you before,” Clint says to Peter, “but now I don’t get you so officially I’ve got the decoder pin and everything. It doesn’t work, by the way. The decoder pin. I can’t decode this.”

“Oh, go crawl into an air vent.”

“No wait, that came out wrong. I mean this in the most heterosexual way possible, Spidey, but you’re cute enough and smart enough. Why *him*? No offense,” he adds, to Wade. “You know you’re my bro.”

“No, I’m with you,” Wade says. “I don’t ask it to make sense. I just cherish my luck.”

“Makes perfect sense to *me* now,” Pepper says breezily as she passes through the room, “and it would to you too if you were paying attention like a good little spy,” and she’s gone again.

Clint points to where she disappeared. “Someday she’s gonna learn to only be in one place at a time,” he says.

“It’s not that complicated,” says Peter. “It’s just kinda hard to explain. It’s like. You know how when you drop an ice cube in water, the ice cracks?”

“Yeah...?”

“And sometimes it happens right away, or sometimes it takes a few seconds, but until it does, it just doesn’t feel right? But then when it does, it’s *profoundly* satisfying? Like, popping-every-bubble-on-an-entire-sheet-of-bubble-wrap satisfying?”

“If you say so.”

“And on the rare occasions that it *doesn’t* happen, everything feels just a tiny bit *off*, and you don’t even want the water anymore but you drink it anyway because you’re thirsty and you need it? And it still satisfies that need, but the satisfaction doesn’t *feel* satisfying?”

“If this isn’t a metaphor I’m going to become very annoyed, very fast.”

“It is. When Wade grins at me there’s this pop in the back of my head and it sounds just like an ice cube cracking.”

“Ugh, I was afraid you were gonna say something like that. And it’s not the homo, Webs, and it’s not the fact that it’s Wilson you’re talking about. It’s that godawful Meg Ryan Lifetime Original Hallmark *bullshit* of a lost, rambling metaphor.”

“Well to be fair, I *am* a tall drink of water,” says Wade.

“Nobody asked for your opinion,” says Clint. “Especially not your opinion of yourself.”

“Yeah,” says Peter. “Shut up and let me talk about you.”

“But I’m *right here*.”

“And?”

“Jesus, you’re already married,” says Clint.

Peter’s head goes a bit quiet, and so does his face.

“Then why don’t I remember the honeymoon?” Wade says. “And why didn’t we get a bunch of free cookware and stuff?”

“Oh, and you have that ‘happily married’ brand of entitlement issues, too,” says Clint. “Look at that.”

“Says the bitter divorcee.”

“Easy there, Captain Glass Houses.”

Wade wraps both arms defensively around Peter's waist and sticks out his tongue. "If you shut up three sentences ago, we'll let you housesit in our luxurious chateau when we go to Rio in the spring."

"Sure, get your kicks in before you accidentally adopt three kids."

"We'll be starting our family with a dog first, I'm sure. We can take a plucky teenager under our wing *after* our brand starts to get stale and needs fresh blood to maintain the interest of the youth."

"I see what you're trying to do."

"Just makin' conversation. Not commenting on your personal life in an attempt to shift the focus away from us because you're embarrassing my man *at all*."

Peter doesn't say anything. His brain trails away through the murky concept of marriage, toward nothing in particular.

Clint raises a finger to his ear for a moment. "I'd love to stay and continue to give you shit," he says, "but duty calls."

"I don't think it does," says Wade as Clint gets up and goes. "I think you just faked a phone call to get out of a conversation, but like, super-spy style."

"Not acknowledging you...!"

"I will not be denied!"

Peter puts a hand on Wade's arm. "Settle down, you can play with your little friend later," he says. "Let it go."

"I don't wanna! Barton! Get back here and play with me *now*, dammit!" Wade freezes, then makes a whoa-slow-down gesture with one hand, tapping his ear with the other. "...I just heard what I said there."

"Better late than never," says JARVIS' voice from the ceiling and at least two walls. "Mr. Stark is in lab 32A, if you'd like to follow the blue lights..."

They exchange a look. Wade shrugs.

"We *did* come all the way here," says Peter.

"After you," says Wade. "As enthusiastic as he usually is to see me..."

"I got him to lift the permaban against you. That's pretty enthusiastic, relatively speaking."

They stop outside the lab door. Peter peels off a glove to test his palm against the biometric lock; it opens for him. That's kind of sweet.

Tony is standing in the midst of the holo-projection equivalent of a mass of dissheveled papers, primarily occupied with one central schematic. "Webs!" Tony calls, opening his arms in welcome and accidentally sending the 3D model spinning through the air. "You're alive! That's good, that's a great start."

"Of course he's alive," Wade says as if personally affronted.

"Calm your tits. It didn't look like such a sure thing after what I saw on the dragonfly feed."

“They just caught me off guard,” Peter says. “Of course I’m alive.”

“I know. I saw the footage. By which I mean I saw footage of you walking outta there alive. Didn’t quite catch what happened while you were actually inside the building...?”

Peter sidesteps the press for details. That would require thinking about the details, and he’d really rather not. “We won,” he says instead, hoping his tone brooks no argument and leaves no openings.

“You won, you survived, you just hate me.”

“Hate you? Tony, I don’t—“

“Well what am I s’posed to think? You never write, you never call — even after you *say* you will, which is troubling *and* rude—“

“That was supposed to be for work-related stuff,” says Peter, “and that all ended up working out... differently.”

“‘Differently’, yeah, you could say that I guess. And yeah, I remember. I had a hand in your rescue, remember? Or did you not tell him?” He looks at Wade, scandalized. “You wanted to take all the credit and earn all the trust points?”

“Hell if I remember,” says Wade.

“He told me,” says Peter. “I asked. I don’t like knowledge gaps.”

Tony finally stops the model’s free spin and swipes it away with hasty gestures. “So do I!” he cries. “See we’re *so* much alike. And yet you avoid me like you’re drowning in freewheeling self-hatred.”

“Tony, I don’t *hate* you.”

“So you thank me for my gracious aid by ignoring me for another month? Don’t say you were busy. Don’t lie to me. Nobody’s busier than I am who’s not in charge of a country.”

Peter and Wade share an involuntary look. Peter feels like his look might be a little on the guilty side.

“Oh don’t say it,” says Tony.

“I was... preoccupied,” says Peter.

“Don’t *say* it!”

“With. Stuff.” His look at Wade turns shyer.

Even Wade rolls his eyes, so hard Peter can tell through the panda-mask. “Yep, that sure is what the kids are callin’ it these days,” he says, innocently.

“Oh. Ugh. I didn’t wanna know that.”

“Shouldn’t have asked,” says Peter.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t have. I had a suspicion and I should’ve trusted my gut but I was just hoping you’d tell me there was another bomb threat, anything, something different. Now I can’t stop picturing it.”

Wade's pretending to examine his fingernails through his gloves. "Don't like it, don't look," he says.

"I'm *trying*. It's in my *head*, oh."

"So what's that you're working on?" Peter says, loudly.

"Ugh, gah. Not wholesome. Not family-friendly."

"Some kinda new project?"

"Project, the project, yes, thank you," says Tony, shaking a you've-got-it finger at Peter.

"Prosthetics upgrade for Cap's psycho boyfriend," he says, pulling it back up and zooming out until it stops looking like detailed, symmetrical machine components and instead like a human arm, rotating it so Peter can see.

"Who?" asks Peter.

Tony waves. "Eh, you'll meet him eventually. Or not. I dunno. I don't know the future, Webs. I'm not a Magic Eight-Ball. If you shake me up you won't like what comes bubbling up to the surface. What I *do* know is that at this stage in my life I am, evidently, nothing if not supportive of my friends' and allies' romantic choices, no matter *how* dubious. I wasn't so sure, before, but now I am. Sure. Now I'm sure. Or at least I'm sure if they are. And you are? I mean, are you? You'd better be."

He turns back and forth between Peter and the glowing blue arm, mostly making eye contact with the latter and loosely hugging his elbows.

"Sure as sugar," says Peter, internally wincing at the corny Aunt May-ism.

Tony touches the tip of his nose as if to scratch an itch but too briefly to actually do any scratching — another tic. "Good to know and duly noted," he says before bringing the image down with both hands.

"Again, I'm *right here*," Wade reminds them, looking up from the box labeled SPARE GOOGAHS he's been digging around in.

"You just stand there and look pretty," Peter says. "The science guys are talking."

"You only get to say that if you're actually talking about science!"

Tony looks at Peter. "We could do that."

Peter shrugs.

"Tell me what you learned in bomb school and I'll tell you how I used to do it better."

Which turns out to be a surprisingly interesting way to pass an early afternoon. Tony finds Peter's descriptions of his learned processes "cute" but other than that doesn't get too condescending about it. The subject sets Peter's stomach on a tilt at first, but Tony's impatience for information forces him past that, and once Peter gets up to speed (and Tony slows down a bit to meet him in the middle) so that the discussion flows evenly between them he finds that talking through the procedures is less... evocative than he at first feared. By 1:45 his words are failing their descriptive function and he's digging through the GOOGAHS box for spare parts to make demonstrations instead. Tony lays a hand on the edge of the box and slowly lowers it.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary, Webs,” he says. “I’d just have to defuse them later anyway.”

“Not if we take them down to your super-special reinforced testing lab in the basement and set them off,” says Peter.

Tony looks at him askance. “Now I’m not one to judge,” he starts.

“But you’re about to be judgmental?”

“I’m about to express some concern over your psychological well-being if you’re this eager to build and set off explosives all of a sudden.”

“I haven’t been getting out much,” he shrugs.

“So go play laser tag with your boyfriend or something. You don’t have to resort to drugs or homemade incendiary weapons to get your kicks. This is the voice of experience speaking.”

“If that’s how you’re gonna be then I can just take my good company and leave. You ready to go, Wade?”

Wade, cross-legged in the corner, looks up from the most-of-a-deck of cards fanned out in his hands and casts around. DUM-E, sitting across from him, drops an 8 of clubs onto the discard pile. “Oh, we’re leaving? I thought we were gonna raid the Iron fridge?”

“That was before my questionable coping methods were questioned.”

“So you agree they’re questionable,” says Tony.

“Of course. They absolutely are.”

“Then why won’t you let me question them?”

“Because it’s gonna take a lot longer before I’m willing to trust your judgment with my well-being,” Peter says. “Until then you can keep your questions.”

“I thought we were past the whole... y’know, that whole thing?”

“That whole kidnapping thing?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Forgiven, not forgotten,” says Peter. “You’re smart. You can see why I might very much agree that you’re *not* one to judge.”

Tony holds up both his hands in surrender. “At least promise to stop by for lunch sometime in the near future.”

“I just did.”

“I mean and actually consume food with me instead of playing Evil Midnight Bomber What Bombs At Midnight. Talk about regular life maybe instead of old builds. Talk about *new* builds, even. Something current. Something relevant to your life as it presently is.”

“Nice reference, by the way,” says Wade, standing up and dropping all his cards to the floor (DUM-E’s arm droops). Tony looks at him like he forgot Wade was there. He very well may have. “If you’re gonna have a long argumentative goodbye, baby boy, I’ll meet you at the ground floor.”

He puts his hands on his lower back and arches until it pops, and saunters out.

Tony turns squarely to Peter. “Let me be your friend, dammit. Do you have any idea how rarely I even *try* with people? And do you have any idea how much I’m trying with *you*?”

“I’ve got a rough idea,” says Peter. “And I’m trying too, okay? Do *you* know how awkward it is for me to make or accept advances of friendship under normal circumstances, much less when there’s a history of kidnapping involved? I’m not, no, I’m not mad anymore, but that doesn’t make it easy, either. You’re just going to have to be patient.”

“I’m *so* bad at that.”

“And I’m bad at friends. We’ll have to make do.”

“Don’t like it.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve got to work with what we’ve got to work with.”

A smirk. “You have a real way with words.”

A grin. “You’re a real asshole, Tony.”

“I try.”

“I’ll see you Thursday or Friday,” says Peter. “Saturday on the outside.”

“Well now you’ve gone and spoiled the surprise.”

“I didn’t realize surprise was a factor...?”

“Don’t worry. You haven’t ruined anything. I’ll have forgotten by tonight.”

“You’re a weird one.”

“Really? You see *Deadpool* as boyfriend material and you call *me* weird?”

“I never said I wasn’t. But you are too.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t resist my friendship.”

“I’m not resisting!”

“I’m just messin’ with you.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Don’t make wishes. It’s a waste.”

Peter doesn’t ask what it’s supposedly a waste *of*, because this exchange could go on forever if he keeps biting the conversational bait, and Wade is waiting for him. He just scowls (Tony answers with a shit-eating grin) and opens the door.

Pepper is standing in the hall outside the lab when Peter steps out. She’s swiping this way and that on a tablet that’s tucked against her forearm like a clipboard. Peter ducks around her, feeling his face shut like a fortress.

She looks up and reaches out a hand as he passes her, not to touch but to ask him to wait. He does,

but automatically, without deciding to. He's not sure he would've complied if he'd taken time to think about it first. He may not be angry at Tony anymore, but Tony's been *trying*; Pepper's another story.

Her gaze coasts just past Peter's face and lands on his ear. "Spider-Man," she says, "please, you deserve to know that I'm. I'm really sorry." She blinks once; something about the blink looks weird, like she did it to disguise a tic. "Truly."

Not many people can use the word "truly" in a sentence (much less *as* a sentence) without sounding scripted. She, evidently, can. Peter nods solemnly, mostly to himself, and searches her with what can safely be presumed to be *very* expressive eye contact. Which always feels risky.

But for a short but glass-clear moment, it feels worth the risk, and bearable.

Pepper's always used her own kind of powers to be good to people in general, and to people who hang out in the narrow radius of Tony's personal life in particular. (She takes care of Tony on multiple levels.) And Peter's reasonably certain she does like him, and for his part he can't help but admire her, most recent experiences with her notwithstanding.

"I would like to talk to you later," Peter says with peculiar emphasis and pretty much all his heart. "Pepper," he adds, for conversational symmetry and really nothing else.

"Actually, you know, I think I'd like it if you called me Virginia, if... that's alright with you. It is my real name. And I'd really like to get to know you *outside* of us both knowing Tony. Schedule permitting."

"Sounds like a challenge."

She shrugs. "I'm game if you are."

He looks at the wall and considers a moment, which is (unsurprisingly) a moment too long for her sense of conversational rhythm.

"I think I might actually really admire you," says Pepper. "Not in, like, an 'inspirational' Special Olympics kind of way, so much as how you made yourself into a superhero before you even finished high school."

"I appreciate your using finger-quotes over 'inspirational'."

"I thought you might."

Peter can sense his lingering reservations and his benefit of the doubt settle into a stalemate.

"Whether we actually end up friends or not," says Pepper, "and I'm not suggesting we *absolutely will* or somehow *have to*, I feel like we each owe it to ourselves to at least be willing to explore the possibility."

Nobody's so rich they can afford to turn down a friend, Peter, says Aunt May's voice in his head.

It *would* be worthwhile to learn more about the only other person besides Bruce or Col. Rhodes who has any degree of persuasive influence over Tony. And if she was able to learn how to speak Tony, probably she could learn how to speak Peter, too, if she cared to. She's certainly smart enough.

Maybe if she does, she'll learn to stop talking almost every time Peter tries to take a minute to

think.

Which might be good for her, too. Her responsibilities don't seem to leave much room for just... stopping and processing. It must be tiring for her. Peter doesn't see how she can stand it *and* stay on her feet.

"Virginia," he says, and makes a face. "...It doesn't seem to fit."

"Yeah, well, it's what I've got."

"Okay." He hesitates. "But we can have that conversation later, right?"

"I can't think of a better way to start." She's brightening. "I'll text you, and we can meet up somewhere?"

"Sure." He starts away, then before he can second-guess himself, says, "It's Peter."

He's not sure how to interpret the way her smile changes. "I know," she says, sounding vaguely apologetic.

"You do? Wait. Of course you do. No, I mean — I'm saying it's *Peter*."

"Oh, I—" She bites down on whatever she was about to say next. "Peter." She *smiles* it.

He's in the elevator when Virginia says, "*That's* why you're amazing, Spider-Man." The door closes before he can ask her what she means.

He shakes his head. Always gotta be cryptic at the last second, don't they.

The elevator pauses and opens for someone at a floor midway down. Dr. Bruce Barn Owl Bananer is standing in front of the door with his forehead wrinkled and his eyes wider than usual. They widen even more when they see Spider-Man there, and Bruce crowds into the elevator with no preamble and just throws his arms around Peter.

Peter takes one step backwards before the panic freezes him and he registers what's happening. Bruce's stale-coffee-and-sweaty-uncle smell comes through as familiar, a lifeline through the suffocating-surrounded feeling. Then it's over.

Bruce steps back, nodding over and over, almost in tears. "I uhh heard you were in the building," he says. "It's good to see you."

"You too," Peter responds, on autopilot.

The door closes, and the elevator keeps going down, and Peter wishes that he'd said the same exact thing, except *not* on autopilot.

He didn't *plan* to cram visits with everyone all into the same week, but if he had planned it, this is exactly the order he would've done it in: saving the most familiar for last, for when his social spoons are at their most depleted but he's still got momentum on his side.

Peter wouldn't normally ring the doorbell — so formal, so distant — but it *has* been a while, and he does have Wade in tow, and while those things aren't *necessarily* spanners in the works, Peter can't predict the future, especially considering all the current factors in play. Even though Wade does have, by way of peace offering, plastic bags straining with a cargo of sushi and a bottle of rice

wine... and even though Wade's wearing a nice burgundy cashmere sweater over a collared shirt and there's no bloodstains on his khakis ("interview pants," he'd called them, with no small amount of derision)... and even though he's freshly showered and shuffling his feet with shy nerves, he's still military-straight-backed as some baked-in defensive gesture, and he's still — inevitably — A Lot To Take In.

Too much for Peter to just open the door and *come home* like normal.

Aunt May makes a loud sound when she sees Peter and has him in a flattening hug before he can even say "Hey." Her hugs still feel powerful even now that he's become used to Wade's. She baps the side of his face with her fingers in effigy of a slap and says, "And just where in the blue do you think you've been that's so important you don't even call me for months? You don't answer my messages? You don't come by for your *birthday*? What was I supposed to think?"

"That I dropped my phone in the toilet and couldn't afford a new one?"

"Try again."

"Uh..."

"Well don't try *too* hard." May's face turns wry and her fists drop from her hips as she eyeballs Wade up and down. "I can clearly see that you've been distracted."

Peter's shoulders come down from around his ears, slowly. "And you're so glad to see it that you just can't stay mad?"

She smirks. "Wanna bet? You still haven't introduced him yet."

"I don't know how these things are supposed to go!" Peter says. Pause. Take stock. *You're not a teenager anymore, Parker. There's nothing to be defensive about.* "Aunt May, this is Wade. He — we've been together since November."

Her brows go up. "Well, at least you made it home before St. Patrick's Day," she says. She appraises Wade with a slightly squinted eye. "Are you military?"

Wade chokes at first. Then he says, "Former. Canadian."

Peter blinks. He always forgets that about Wade.

"Well you're standing up straighter than Forrest Gump," says May. "At ease, soldier. You're among civilians now and I feel creaky just looking at you. Is that food?"

"From Oishi Sushi," says Peter.

"Not bad," says May. "I accept your offering. C'mon in, boys, take a load off. I've just got to clear the table. You caught me in the middle of sorting old photos for the album. Nothing of interest to you in this box here, though, mostly old friends from when Ben and I were dating. No one you would've known. So? Come on, don't leave me hanging. What's been happening in the amazing world of Peter?"

For now he sticks to giving her the lowdown on his current situation. This is planned: start with the happy ending so she knows everything's turned out alright, *then* go backwards and regale her with the rocky path that led here — and try to make it entertaining, so she doesn't lose her head. (He hasn't planned out when exactly to drop the *big* one, but he's sure it'll come up sometime. Sometime when he'd normally lie to her.)

Her hands pause in their tidying for just a moment when he tells her he's been living with Wade, but that's the only hiccup. Well, that and her general disappointment over Peter's unemployment.

"Oh Peter. Again?" she says, placing the third wineglass and pulling out a chair. They all sit down and Wade starts slowly doling out the food containers, trying not to call any attention to himself.

"I keep busy," Peter says, defensively.

"Of that I have no doubt," says May. "I guess as long as you're staying safe."

He can't help but share a weighted look with Wade.

"Oh no," says May.

"About that," says Peter.

May starts to say something, then stops, decides to wait in expectant silence instead.

Peter takes a long pause while his brain spins down the intricate flowchart of potential routes this conversation could take, mentally rehearsing each possible exchange in frantic flashes of thought *just one last time* until the only thing left to do is to say it, to tip that first domino and you're mixing metaphors, Parker, you're beyond nervous you're terrified. He squeezes Wade's hand, gets two squeezes back.

"I'm Spider-Man."

May breathes out through her nose and her eyebrows give a little twitch. "And?"

And Peter's brain, poised on the brink of approximately eighty-six thousand different conversations, misses that first crucial step entirely and falls into the gap. He knows he's blue-screening because he feels fuzzy, like he's going to pass out. Wade adds his other hand and presses Peter's hand flat between his palms.

Aunt May *laughs*. "Well did you expect me to be *surprised*?" she says. "Peter, honey, you know I love you more than anything, but you're a *terrible* liar — and always have been."

Peter's taking deep belly-breaths. "And here I was, thinking there was a chance *you* might faint," he admits, slouching sideways and resting his head on the back of Wade's shoulder, hiding his eyes away from the swimming colors and May's dancing facial expressions. It's not enough; he pushes his chair back and folds over, putting his head between his knees.

"Oh please," says May. "I've known for years, Peter. Since you were still in high school. If you wanted to keep it from me so badly you should've been better about keeping up with your own laundry. I've only been pretending not to know out of good manners."

Peter makes unintelligible, froglike sounds.

"Maybe you could take some lessons from her," Wade tells Peter, "in keeping secrets."

"You could do worse," May agrees. "You'll have to work a little harder if you wanna surprise me, Peter. Now what about you?" she asks, turning her attention on Wade. (Peter can feel Wade's spine go army-straight again.)

"Me? What about me? Aquarius with Cancer rising."

"What's your story?" says May. "Superpowers? Secret agent? Alien?"

“I, um, heal.”

“So you’re like a magic doctor? Or a radioactive therapist or whatever, something?”

Wade looks like he’s swallowed a toad and is choking on it. “No, I mean I’m the only — I mean *I* heal. *From* things?”

May nods, then quirks a brow. “Ah... Don’t we all?”

“From, like. Death and dismemberment.”

“He can’t die, Aunt May,” says Peter, sitting back up, glad for the conversation to be moving on, even if this is where it’s going.

The way she’s looking at Wade changes.

“Not permanently, anyway,” says Wade, looking at his own knees.

There’s a long pause during which Aunt May’s look changes two or three more times, then she says, “I see. Well, aren’t you the lucky one. And now this is the part where I embarrass you both by asking just how old you are, really.”

“Thirty-eight.”

Peter headtilts. Did he know that? (Does it matter?)

May hums and pops a slice of ngiri into her mouth, and for a long moment just chews. “Oh, that’s much better,” she finally says. “I was afraid you were going to say two hundred or something bizarre and immortal-sounding like that. Well. I’ve seen bigger gaps work out just fine,” she adds, a little guardedly. She’s going to have a private “chat” with Wade later, Peter can already tell. Wade probably can, too. His back is still stiff.

Peter tells the rest of the story, very carefully, but May’s biggest reactions are of pity, and those aren’t overly dramatic. It makes him feel like he’s been overreacting to everything for months. The part about the cult surprises her, a little, but after his anticlimactic Spider-Man confession, nothing seems like too big a deal for her to take in, or for Peter to tell. He stops talking when the food runs out and May is quietly sipping her wine (she’s the only one who has any left).

Wade coughs.

“Peter,” says May, “come help me clean up.” There’s no room in her voice for argument.

“Boy, you really wanted to get the jump on me *somehow* tonight, didn’t you?” she asks once they’re alone in the kitchen together, scraping loose rice off plates and into the trash. “Anything else up your sleeves that you think is going to be news to me? No? You know you forgot to tell me you’re bisexual, too. Which is also not a surprise,” she says, cutting off Peter’s embarrassed and probably nonsensical protests.

“Nothing else. I thought between Wade and me being Spider-Man...”

“Well I would’ve liked to hear about the boyfriend before meeting him, but mostly just for the sake of knowing how many people I’d be hosting for dinner eventually. Sorry, kiddo, but the only part of Wade that’s even a bit of a shock to me is his age. And, well, you know.” She waves her hand in a loose circle around her face and lowers her voice, leans in. “I didn’t want to embarrass him by asking...”

“It’s kind of weird,” Peter says. “He has cancer, and the healing factor keeps it from killing him but doesn’t stop tumors from growing.”

She digests this for a moment. “Learn something new every day…”

“It’s good you didn’t ask him. I actually kind of like it, but he doesn’t. At all.”

“Sounds like a tricky subject.”

“One best avoided,” Peter agrees.

“Anyway he’s mostly *not* a surprise,” May says at normal volume, backtracking a little the way she does when she wants to seal off a conversational tangent into its own forgotten little footnote. “Sorry if that disappoints you, on the heels of not being able to surprise me with news of your being Spider-Man. Wade’s barely a blip, either. Not his gender and not his overall… *type*, if I’m honest.”

Peter tosses a set of disposable chopsticks toward the bin but misses, and they rattle across the floor. “You mean ‘type’ as in ‘superpowered mutate’ or…?”

“Oh… sure, hon. Let’s go with that. Whatever makes you feel comfortable.” She winks and Peter feels his blush reach his hairline. “You gonna pick those up?”

It takes him a minute to realize she means the chopsticks, and he scrambles to get them into the trash while she laughs. He’s laughing, too, by the time he completes his task and straightens up.

“But if I can be a little more serious for a minute, Peter…” She lowers her voice. “How sure are you about this guy? Is he good to you? Treat you alright?”

“No one’s ever treated me better,” Peter says.

“Better than me?”

“No one’s better than you, Aunt May,” he says, and kisses her on the cheek.

“Oh, good answer,” she says. “Glad to see you’ve still got your wits about you, anyway.”

“I have to. How else can anybody keep up with you?”

“You’re on a roll, mister. Now take your victory and go on out there and keep your boy company. I’ll finish up in here.”

(Peter doesn’t overlook that she called Wade his “boy” and not his “man”, and tries very hard not to wonder what else she picked up on.)

Wade’s standing in front of the mantel, staring at framed photos. Peter comes up behind him and takes his hand. “I took that one,” he says, pointing to the one of May and Ben standing elbow to elbow at the kitchen sink, facing away from the camera and washing dishes in a slant of evening sunlight from the window.

“That’s your uncle?”

Peter nods.

“You never talk about him.”

“You’re right,” says Peter. “I don’t.”

Wade searches him for another few seconds, then hums and returns his attention to the pictures, rewrapping his fingers around Peter’s.

“Peter, why don’t you head on upstairs now and see if there’s anything you wanted to get,” says May. “Wade, you can stay here. Let’s get acquainted.”

Something about the way she says *acquainted* leaves no room for doubt that she’s about to interrogate Wade and possibly give him a shovel talk, and something about the way Wade’s eyes scream at Peter for help says that it’s going to be one hundred percent effective.

“You’ll be fine,” Peter promises him, and kisses his forehead before heading up to his old room.

There are two giftwrapped boxes waiting on the bed for him, one blue and silver with snowflakes, the other green and yellow with little teardrop-shaped birds. It’s a lonely little display and Peter knows the stab of guilt he feels at the sight was absolutely intended for him. He briefly debates opening them now or taking them home as is, but May will probably be expecting thanks on his way out, so better do it now.

The bird paper — birthday gift — is hiding a really nice camera bag from Timbuk2 with lime green lining; the snowflakes — Chanukah — reveal *very* nicely double-framed photos, professionally framed, one of his parents with him as a toddler, the other of May and Ben with him as a small child of about six. The latter must’ve been taken not long after he came to live with them. Peter’s never seen it before. He wonders who took it.

His eyes linger over Ben and May a lot longer than they do over Richard and Mary.

He fishes his old backpack out of the closet and places the gifts inside, wondering where the hell in Wade’s squat he can safely display the photos where they won’t get broken within a month. Then he moves around the room in slow circle, fitting this and that into the backpack — his old web fluid kit, his stuffed giraffe Slendy, extra socks, that set of folding headphones he hasn’t used since high school. It’ll feel good to have some of his own stuff around him, even if it’s mostly stuff he hasn’t touched in ages.

A quick stop in the bathroom and he goes back downstairs with loaded backpack. It’s been about twenty, twenty-five minutes — seems like it should be enough time for May to have gotten everything out of her system, and hopefully not so long a time that Wade is traumatized.

Halfway down he hears both their voices raised in laughter and it’s so surreal he nearly misses a step. Both those sounds are so achingly familiar, each in their own way, and to hear them together is to bring two separate galaxies’ worth of memories and sense impressions into confusing collision. Is this what the exploding brain meme feels like?

“Petey!” says Wade when he catches sight. “She’s not scary — she’s a firecracker! I think I got her figured out now.”

May rests her chin on her fingers. “I don’t think ya do, Jawline, sorry.”

“Close enough for horseshoes?”

“Does this look like a Victorian garden party to you?”

“Christ, woman, gimme a break! I just met you! It takes time to develop comedic rhythm.”

“You’ll never catch up,” May says, grimly, “but keep trying anyway. It’s fun to watch. It’s cute. Like a fat kitten trying to climb up a set of stairs.” She looks up at Peter. “You get everything you need, hon?”

“For now,” says Peter.

“Well how much do you need?”

“A little more than usual, since the fire at the storage unit.”

She whaps him on the forearm. “You didn’t tell me about that part.”

“It’s been a long year. Not even a year. It’s been a long nine or ten months. I’ve got stories to last three or four visits at least.”

“Mm, just as long as you don’t make me wait so long in between those visits.”

“Of course not. Thank you for the presents.”

“You’re welcome, hon. Now come over here and let me hug you.”

Peter obeys as Wade gets to his feet. “You too, Wade,” says May, turning to him with determined arms. Wade has to fold nearly in half to give her a proper hug. Peter’s brain glitches a little at the dissonant sight. He always forgets how small May is (he *never* forgets what a massive hunk of beef Wade is).

“One last thing before you go, Peter,” she says. “Do something for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Something, you know.” She waggles her fingers. “Spidery. I’m sorry, I’ve just got to see it for myself.”

Peter glances at Wade — they exchange subtle shrugs — then sets the backpack down and jumps up, flips midair, lands feet-first on the ceiling. His hair is an instant mess, but the evening’s wrapping up anyway. “Ta-daa,” he says, doing a jazzy little wave.

May goes just the slightest bit paler, and laughs with nerves. “Oh my,” she says, pressing a palm to her mouth, then the other palm. “My god.” She waves him down. “Alright, that’s enough, come down, I just... Whew! Of course I’ve known for years, but it’s really real now, know what I mean? It’s one thing on tv, with that silly *costume*, but...”

“It’s not *that* silly,” Peter says, inverting and dropping back to the floor.

“It is pretty silly, babe,” says Wade.

“Well you’re one to talk.”

“Mine isn’t spandex.”

“Well *mine* isn’t a knock-off.” Peter sticks his tongue out at Wade and pulls the backpack on over his shoulders. They say their final round of goodbyes, and get their final round of May hugs, and then they’re out the door, walking slowly to clear the last of the wine from their heads, hand in warm hand.

“Just one more stop,” says Wade.

“Are you kidding? It’s already late enough for—“

“You won’t regret it, I promise! I just wanna show you something real quick. It’s not really ready yet but I still want you to see it anyway. It’s been a really good night and this’ll just be the most perfectest ending! It’s not far.”

“Wade...”

“It’s not far! If we go now it’ll save us a trip later. We’re in the neighborhood!”

“Forest Hills?”

“Okay well, we’re in the ballpark anyway.”

Peter shivers and lifts Wade’s arm up, tucks himself into the warmth underneath. “How big is this ballpark?” he asks. “Do we have to take the train?”

“I mean we could... Actually, yeah, we probably should. Should we? Author’s too lazy to learn about how New York works...”

“Wade. You’re drifting.”

“Whaddaya want, Spider-Pete? I just got grilled by your aunt. I’m psychologically exhausted.”

“All the more reason to put off this... whatever this is.”

“No, no! It has to be now!” He starts jumping from one tiptoe to the other. “Pleeease?”

“You look like you have to pee,” Peter says.

“Well? I *really* wanna go!”

Peter laughs. “Alright, fine. Lead the way, you big baby.”

Turns out it really isn’t that far, but they take a cab anyway just to get out of the cold and “speed along the plot,” as Wade puts it. Peter wonders what medium they’re being rendered in, in Wade’s head. Comic book or Netflix Original serial drama seem equally likely, but he wouldn’t rule out Adult Swim series or bad fanfiction, either. Peter would ask, but something tells him that answering that question might break Wade’s brain a little bit.

Wade actually pays the driver when asked. He’s either in a good mood, or desperate to impress, or both. Probably both.

Both is good.

Peter gets out of the cab and puts his hands against his lower back, under the bottom edge of the backpack, arching his spine until something cracks.

“Aw,” Wade says. “I was gonna open the door for you.”

“Snooze, you lose,” says Peter.

“That’s okay, I’ll open this one for you instead.” He skips across the sidewalk and into the vestibule of the actually pretty nice-looking building they’ve stopped at and fiddles a key — no,

not that one, a second key — no, not that one, a third key into the main door. Then he glomps Peter's hand and pulls him up the stairs, and doesn't stop pulling until they reach the fourth floor. "What the heckle-'n'-jekyll, I'll open this one, too," he says, and fits the key — no, not that one — "And remind me to mark these damn keys somehow.

"Elevator's broken, by the way," he adds, "but the guy's supposed to come on Thursday, and if he doesn't, I'll be coming for *him*, 'cause only plebs take the stairs and I will not be ignored, Petey, I won't."

"I think most people have a hard time ignoring you," says Peter with an indulgent smile.

"And that's by design." The lock clicks back. "Oh, and I'm getting at least two more locks put on here. Close your eyes a second."

"New safehouse?" Peter asks.

"Kinda, I mean hopefully, but it's — why aren't your eyes closed?"

Peter closes them, hears the door open. The inside of his eyelids turn black to red as lights come on inside, then Wade's grabbing his wrist and pulling him forward a few steps. "Okay, now."

Big! Big space! Not compared to the factory squat of course, but big enough to accommodate an impressive sectional sofa in black leather, layered with fluffy cream-colored sheepskins across the back and piles of throw pillows in different kinds of green. The huge area rug is in geometric greens and golds. The TV is nearly half the size of the exposed-brick wall it's mounted on and it presides over an orderly shelf of gaming consoles, including two Switches standing side by side on the highest shelf. Game cartridges are organized on a shelf to the left of this, movies and shows to the right.

"Hire a decorator?" Peter asks, impressed with the orderliness and high standard of cleanliness more than anything.

"I know a guy," Wade replies, idly picking lint off of his sleeve.

The curtains fall all the way to the floor in layers of pale gauze and a print featuring black-and-white vintage-looking scientific illustrations of birds. The view beyond them isn't the most impressive or colorful, but it's clear and open by New York standards and will let in a lot of light during the day. Peter wonders which compass direction the window faces, whether the light will be there morning or evening, what kind of plant life it might be able to support. He runs his hands down the curtain fabric — smooth. "Birds, huh?" he says. "Interesting fabric choice."

"You like that," says Wade, but it doesn't sound like a question, exactly.

The window itself is enormous, almost a patio door. It would be very easy to get in and out of, if you're Spider-Man or Deadpool.

The kitchen has an induction range and full-sized fume hood, and the kind of fridge with the freezer part on the bottom that's so hulking-huge it makes Peter feel like someone very small when he stands near it. "It's the size of the breakfast-fridge at Tony's," he says.

"Is it? Well this one doesn't come with a voice in the walls. No Alexa here, no sir. I don't like surveillance unless I put up the camera and microphone myself. Oh, speaking of, they're still not done soundproofing in the bedroom or spare room, so the tour will have to be a little bit abbreviated."

Peter doesn't care; he's still preoccupied with the size of the fridge. He opens it: eggs, bacon, sausage, juice, some fruits in their own bowls...

"It *is* a breakfast-fridge!"

"Oh please. *Brunch*-fridge if anything."

Peter closes it and pokes at the magnets stuck on. There's already at least two sets of rainbow-colored alphabet magnets and a ton of those little poetry words scattered across its silver surface. Right around throat level he reads:

hand s creep ing across naked red sheet s
a tender question

The bathroom is a soft dove-grey with white and mint-colored tiles. The tub is big, and is the kind they make for disabled people with a tight-sealing little door in the side so you don't necessarily have to step over anything to get in or out.

"Good for injuries," Wade says. "And post-death baths."

The shower curtain has a pattern of yellow rubber duckies on. The fixtures are brushed silver and look spanking new. The mirror is in three panels, the kind where the two outer panels rotate away from the wall so it's easy to see the sides or even back of your head if you have to.

There are two toothbrush holders.

"So I know the main color palette seems a little off-brand for me," Wade's saying from out near the kitchen, "but I thought I remembered you saying you like green (because why else would I be carrying around a mental image of a green Spidey-suit, blech) so that's why all the pillows and shit are green, and I got the black for me, to hide all the bloodstains, because if I got red for me after I'd already gotten green for you it'd look like December threw up all over everything." He coughs, hard. "Not, I mean, not that I went and bought the place for *you*, I mean—" More coughing. "Everything the light touches is *my* kingdom and don't you forget it, but I guess I figured since you spend so much time basically living in the squat with me then you'd probably be even happier basically living in a respectable, responsibly sourced and tastefully decorated condo. Which is mine. That I bought for me."

He leans his head into the bathroom, but doesn't look at Peter. "Just thought since we were near the neighborhood, I thought, I mean, I wanted to show you this place I just bought 'cause you might like to see it and wish you lived here, no big."

The words are all hooked onto feelings which are all balled up in the base of Peter's throat. He comes out of the bathroom and follows Wade to one of the side doors. Inside is an empty room save for lots of plastic on the walls and construction dust on the floor. "I dunno what this room's for yet," Wade is saying. "Never needed a guest room myself, or a home office, or, shit, I dunno, a craft room or a zen room or a room for twenty cats to play in or something. Normally I guess I'd just use it for an armory, but I promised myself that with this place I'd stick to keeping my kit in the closets and trunks only. Nothing but respectable. I wanna be able to invite Captain America over without feeling shame. I even ordered an actual gun cabinet off some small-time artisanal LL Bean-type artist site, classy as shit, all like, mahogany and free-range oak or something, I dunno, but that's coming in like three months or something 'cause they build that shit by hipster-hand and it takes *forever* so for some reason they charge you four times more for the privilege of waiting a dog's age to get it. Anyway *not that any of this is for you* but if you happen to come up with any ideas of what this whole extra room could be used for, y'know, my suggestion box is always

open...”

Peter’s already thinking *darkroom* but, even with the invitation, it feels like an imposition to say so. At least for today. Maybe when he’s less overwhelmed. Less likely to start weeping freely if he opens his mouth.

“My only decorating rule is no singing fish on the walls, though jackalope heads are okay, as long as they don’t sing. Actually no singing decor at all, thanks, that’d be for the best. Interferes with the security systems and also with my capacity to *maintain*.”

“So...” Peter runs the tip of his index finger across the putty-colored wall. Oh they are *so* going to be painting in here. “You bought a condo, huh?”

“You say that like it’s the first time. I still got property in San Francisco, too.”

“Can I ask how?”

“How... what?”

“How you got the place. It’s just, I’m trying to picture you sitting across from a mortgage loan officer,” Peter says, head tilted. “Image is *really* fuzzy.”

“I had my guy hook me up with—“

“Your ‘guy’?”

“Yes, my guy. I got guys. Don’t look so shocked. You’ll give me a complex.”

“Alright. Your ‘guy’ hooked you up. With. Condo?”

“With papers from a recently deceased uhhhm *associate* who happened to have an inexplicably excellent credit score, considering his lifestyle. So I didn’t even have to slum around with the kind of sellers who are willing to take literal cash for real estate. Actual licensed realtors have *way* better selection, turns out. Buuuut yeah it’s all clean and above board, give or take a little victimless identity theft. Now we just gotta wait for the contractors to finish up with the soundproofing and replacing the bedroom window and installing the sex swing and we’re good to go. I mean I’m. I. I am the singular, solitary one who is good to go.”

Peter opens his mouth to answer but it just turns into a bit of a stupid-looking grin instead (that he hopes is cute or endearing — a wish he makes with unprecedented frequency these days). “Uh-huh.”

“Walk-in closet’s practically a third bedroom. It’s got two doors.”

“Both for you, huh?”

“Casper mattress. Washer ’n’ dryer. Dishwasher. *Central air*.”

“Looks like you’ve got it made.”

“Yep, it’s pretty sweet.” Wade stretches his arms; his fingers brush the kitchen doorway. “Kinda lonely though. Thinkin’ of maybe gettin’ a cat and one of those chairs that vibrate.”

Peter looks up from the neat lines of game consoles. “A cat.”

“Yep.”

“Really.”

“That’s right.”

“What if I want a cockatiel?”

“My condo, my cat.” Wade’s looking out the window. “Might call it Klaus. Or Brunhilde. Something German, I dunno why. Just feels right.”

“Not French?”

“No. Maybe. Why? Is that better?”

“I dunno. Cats. Fancy, delicate. French.”

“Nah. If I get a ferret I’ll call it something french. For the irony. Cat’s gotta be German. Dog’s gonna be Japanese, maybe Russian.”

“Gonna have a whole menagerie, huh?”

“Just like the lesbians do it.”

Peter closes the distance between them, takes his time about it. Wade’s playing with the edge of the window curtain. He seems particularly focused on an illustration of a yellow-bellied sapsucker. Peter knows Wade doesn’t know enough to appreciate the joke there. “You gonna name all the mice and bugs that find their way in, too?”

“Well the mice will all be named after Disney characters, obviously,” says Wade, giving up and putting his arms around Peter’s waist. “And the spiders... can probably have a nice Jewish name. In honor of my all-time second-favorite superhero. I’ll throw each one a tiny little bar or bat mitzvah when it spins its first web.”

“That seems unnecessary and probably difficult.”

“I just like the part where they lift the chair.”

“You’re a weirdo. But yeah, everyone likes that part.” He pauses. “Wait. Second favorite?”

“By default! Captain America was promised top billing for life back when I was about seven years old, so you never had a chance. I can’t do anything about it now, Pete, I took an officially sanctioned fan club *oath*. They hook you when you’re young, y’know, they’re absolutely devious. It’s not personal, Spidey. It’s about *honor*.” He presses his fist to his chest and sticks out his chin, scowling with the Srs Bsns of it all.

Wade’s Not-For-Serious Serious Face is *adorable*. Like baby-buffalo-with-a-flower-crown adorable. Peter pushes him back against the window. The curtain of birds falls shut behind Peter, revealing them to the world outside the window but shielding them from the warmly lit condo, so it feels weirdly like privacy. Peter’s breath steams the glass over Wade’s shoulder.

“I wanna cover the walls in ramps and scratching posts and shit so Germankitty has the biggest bestest playground and never touches any of my stuff,” says Wade. “And I can save money on a laser pointer by just using sniping kit!”

“That sounds like an extraordinarily bad idea.”

“I know! I can’t wait to try it out.”

“Not on my watch.”

“Your watch? And when do you suppose that will be, what with me being the sole only lonely resident? ...Gosh, do you think I should get *two* cats? Then I can train them to fight like pokémon...”

Whatever game Wade’s playing in his head makes Peter worry for a second that he won’t let Peter kiss him.

...

What a stupid worry that was.

“So are you just trying to get me to say it first?” Peter asks.

Wade lifts his brows, far too mildly. “Hm? Say what?”

“Or are you trying to trick me into thinking it was my idea and not yours so you can blame me if something goes wrong?”

“What was your idea? You have an idea? Do tell, I love your ideas.”

“Well you’re not gonna win this one,” says Peter. “If you want it, *you* need to ask for it.”

“Ooo, daddy gonna make me beg?” Wade grins.

Peter half-laughs. “I might later, if you keep pushing me now.”

“That’d better be a promise. I’m taking that as a promise. You can’t stop me.”

“Oh, you are *so* gonna have to earn what you want later,” Peter says, and he’s shaking his head but he’s smiling, because how could he *not* be happy? “You’re gonna have to do a whole lot more than beg.”

“God save the queen, I love me a challenge.”

“*You* love a challenge,” Peter says. “*I’m* not in the mood for one.”

“Boy, did you pick the wrong boyfriend.”

That does it. “*Dammit* Wade, stop being an obtuse brat and ask me to move in with you already! Don’t make me invite myself. I’ll feel like an asshole for the entire time I’m here.”

“Yikes. Well *now* I have stage fright.”

“Wade...”

“Yes?”

“If you make *me* beg, I will punish you in a way that you *will not* enjoy. And *that* is a promise.”

“Jesus. I roll out the red carpet for you and it’s got your *name* embroidered on it and you *still* need me to verbalize it? Alright! Peter Spidey Parker, will you *please* live in sin and sodomy with me in this dope-ass condo I bought, furnished, and at least partially decorated *to your taste*?”

“Duh-doy, Wilson,” says Peter, and kisses him again. This time he doesn’t release Wade for quite

some time. He only stops because the window is cold and it's getting uncomfortable; he pulls them back into the room and the curtain of birds falls softly shut across the city.

"Y'know," says Wade, not quite looking at him, "you might be just slightly too young to have experienced this part of queer culture, but before marriage was legal, getting a place together *was* getting married."

"I never experienced that, no," says Peter, "but I heard about it."

"It's really ingrained," Wade says, knocking his knuckles on the side of his head with a helpless expression that Does Things to Peter. "I know the zeitgeist has shifted an' all, but this still feels like a *really* big deal to me."

"Wade. You *bought* what must be a Very Expensive condo for — correct me if I'm wrong — the express purpose of cohabitating with me."

Wade does not correct him.

"It *is* a really big deal," Peter says. "You got bird curtains and everything..."

"Wait'll you see the bedsheets."

"As long as they feel nice."

"Twelve hundred threadcount." And the next is a blurt: "I just really want you to be happy."

"I am," Peter says, and it's true. "I can't wait to have a whole proper domestic life with you. You're my favorite idiot and I don't wanna eat anyone else's pancakes but yours for the rest of forever. I love you."

"I love *you*. You're my favorite freak. You know I wasn't fucking around when I said you're the best part of my life."

"I know. You're not subtle." Peter glances toward the bathroom door. "I'll be back in a minute."

"I'll be waiting."

Peter smiles. "I know you will."

[Toldja he'd love it.]

"*You* said it would scare him away, you dirty dirty liar and piss-poor prognosticator."

{Well? You do come on too strong for most people.}

[And you do scare most people away, one way or another. If it's not your face, it's your everything else.]

Wade sticks his tongue out. "Petey's not scared of me. He wasn't even scared when I had a gun on him."

[Superheroes aren't known for their common-sense survival instincts.]

"Oh, knock it off. You're not ruining tonight."

[Don't tempt us.]

{It HAS been unusually perfect so far...}

“You’re enjoying it, too. Just lay back and let it happen.”

Petey picks that moment to come back from the bathroom. “Say what now?” he asks with a crooked brow.

Damn, he’s beautiful.

{Your man just asked you a question, dingus.}

“Nothing, baby boy.”

Petey leans into Wade’s body and wraps his arms around his waist. “They being mean?”

“No. Well, they’re trying to. Really they’re just being idiots.”

[Hey!]

“They think this is all too much and gonna scare you off.”

“What? Wade, this is the best night of my life!”

A surge of heat spirals up Wade’s core and explodes fireworks-style into a moronic grin. “Really?”

“Without exaggeration. Bend down, I wanna kiss you.”

“Oh, yes sir.”

He tastes minty.

{Was he brushing his teeth in there?}

[Sexy-sense is tingling!]

{Should we go brush ours? It still tastes like wasabi in here...}

Petey sighs through his mouth as he pulls back, and traces his fingertips along the base of Wade’s throat, smiling quietly to himself. Wade swallows.

“Uhm,” says Wade.

{Good start.}

“Should I go, uh...”

“You should go *nowhere*,” Petey says. A shiver thrills up Wade’s spine.

[OH, that’s his Daddy voice.]

Yes. Yes it is. Wade’s mouth goes dry.

[Does he know yet that he’s a Daddy?]

{Shut up, it’s getting good.}

Petey's tracing the seams of Wade's sweater. "You clean up really nice, by the way."

He can feel his back break out in a sweat. "Only the best for you."

"I like that," says Petey, simply, and for some reason that's what takes the firmness out of Wade's knees and puts it... elsewhere in his body. He exhales hard and has to chase down his next in-breath.

"Yeah?"

"Oh yes."

Wade licks dry lips. "What else would you like, baby boy?" he asks, and spreads his hands. "I'm at your disposal."

Petey answers that with a wicked little grin. "I like *that*, for one thing," he says. "You at my disposal."

"At your service, even!"

"Mm, keep going."

It's hard to, now that Petey's sort of rubbing his *everything* on Wade and backing him up, step by step.

{Try anyway.}

[Please. He wants it.]

"I wish I could zap myself with a shrink ray and crawl inside your pocket and you could carry me around and rub me with your thumb like a rabbit's foot whenever you worry about something. You could put me in a hamster wheel at night."

Petey laughs, softly. "Weirdly, I like that idea, too," he says, "if only in theory. Full-size Wade is both my jelly and my jam, though."

Wade's knees dip involuntarily and he wheezes a nervous laugh of his own. "In that case you could put me on a chain and stake me out in your yard so I could protect you from villains and Jehovah's witnesses. Then you can bring me in at night and I'll sleep on your feet to keep 'em warm and protect you from nightmares."

"I just had an idea about a rolled-up newspaper," says Petey.

"I *like* that idea," says Wade. "We're a regular think tank over here."

Petey tilts his head, eyes roving all over Wade's face, smile full of delight. "Now here's a question I find interesting: what all would you let me do with, for, or *to* you?"

His hand's found the back of Wade's neck now, thumb trailing lightly up and down the vertebrae. Warm tingles flood up and down the rest of Wade's spine in time with it. He hums, feeling a smile soften his mouth. "It might be faster to list the things I *wouldn't* let you do," he says.

"And those are?"

Wade breathes in deep through his nose and hums thoughtfully, dropping his hands down to Petey's hips, round the back, just shy of his ass. "Nonexistent," he says eventually.

“I don’t know if I believe you,” says Petey.

“Well *I* believe,” says Wade, stooping down to clutch at Petey’s plush ass, “that anything that makes you happy is gonna make me, like, four times that amount of happy.” In this posture, his chest is leaning against Petey’s shoulder, and he angles his head to brush his lips across the skin below Petey’s ear. “And we did promise the readers a happy ending,” he says, 40% breath and 60% whisper.

{That’s the least subtle double entendre you’ve ever...}

Petey shudders under him and tightens his grip on Wade’s nape. “Whoever they are, let’s not disappoint them.”

“Never. It’s my life purpose. Aside from Give Petey Whatever He Wants.”

“I want you,” says Petey, “to turn around.”

Wade purrs and obeys, slowly, to find himself knees-first against the edge of the sectional. Petey’s hand drops from his nape to between his shoulder blades and shoves him with enough force to send a dump truck skidding. Wade lands elbows-first on the couch, which slides a good foot and a half across the hardwood.

“Keep your head down,” says Petey, and then hands are lifting Wade’s back half up by the shins and dropping him on his knees on the cushion.

The surprise knocks the wind out of him. He turns his face sideways and pants into the crook of his elbow. Hands trail up the backs of his thighs and knead greedily at his ass. The khakis feel tight.

Petey kneels between Wade’s knees and folds his body down over Wade’s back, around the curve of him. His arms snake around and wrestle with the button on the khakis before losing patience and ripping it open; from the corner of his eye Wade watches the button fall into the crack between cushions.

{Welp. That’ll be there until the end of time.}

Petey brings his arms up to Wade’s chest and hugs him, claws at his chest through the sweater, before righting himself and sliding the pants down around Wade’s ass and leaving them bunched in the crooks of his knees.

Impatient hands hike the sweater and shirt all the way up Wade’s back, leaving them in a huddle of soft fabric across his nape. Chilly air and hot breath coast across his bare skin. Wade groans and arches into the featherlight fingertips tracing down his spine, around his waist. Petey palms him through his boxers and his hands are hot through the cotton; Wade makes a broken sound.

“When you say I can do anything to you,” Petey says, voice a little rough, “it makes me want to do all *kinds* of things. Just to see if I can get you to make a sound I’ve never heard before.”

“*Baby boy*,” Wade breathes.

[If he ever calls YOU “baby boy” we’re gonna die for real and real happy.]

{Shut up, you’re breaking the rhythm.}

“I’ve heard that one before,” says Petey. Then, lower — Wade has *never* heard a voice like this out of Petey or Spidey — “But I love it every time I do.”

Wade *moans* before he even feels it building in his chest.

“Oh,” sighs Petey, “you love making me feel good, don’t you, Wade?”

“*So much.*”

“And *that* feels good.”

Wade hums, content down to his toes.

“You really are mine, aren’t you?” asks Petey. He makes it sound so innocent.

They both know better.

“I can’t let you go to waste, can I,” Petey says. “You’re *my* responsibility.”

[So possessive!]

Wade purrs and snuggles his face into his elbow to hide his smile.

Petey slips his fingers into the waistband of Wade’s boxers (the ones with stompy little dinosaurs on) and coasts them down Wade’s thighs. The unheated air in the condo makes his balls tighten but his cock would sing a paean of freedom if it could. Clever fingers brush teasingly up the length on their way to his ass; Wade inhales, sharp, through his nose.

“What am I gonna do with you...?” Petey asks, and the tease in his voice suggests he already knows good and goddamn well *exactly* what he’s going to do.

But now he’s got Wade wondering.

[I see you shiver... with antici...]

“Thy will be done,” Wade says.

Petey’s hands pause, and then he lets out a held breath. “You blasphemous little horndog,” he says, sounding impressed. He grips Wade’s ass with both palms and digs his fingers in deep, making Wade’s spine tighten. “Am I your god now, is that it?”

“Lemme kneel at the altar of your body,” says Wade, “and I’ll worship your cock with the unthinking fervor of a right-wing zealot.”

“I prefer you kneeling in this direction for now,” says Petey, spreading him open with his thumbs.

“Sunny-side up?” Wade gasps.

Petey laughs. The sound makes Wade’s feet wiggle. “Idiot,” Petey huffs, and Wade can feel his breath on his very exposed asshole.

That’s all the warning he gets before something soft and hot slathers its way up and around his hole. Wade hiccups in surprise and his body jerks forward. Petey growls and grabs him by the hips, yanks him back into position and buries his face in Wade’s ass, cheek to cheek to cheek to cheek.

“Ah — ba — baby boy...”

Petey hums acknowledgement and doesn’t stop working his tongue against Wade — he can feel

his ass tighten and loosen in pulsing turn, and he thanks the lords of hell that he was so careful to shower so thoroughly this evening. A palm strokes soothing circles round one of his cheeks, asking him to relax, and *god* is he trying to. His clenching begins to slow as Petey drags his tongue around, forming the shapes of eldritch alphabets on delicate skin.

Wade's back doesn't feel cold anymore. His chest is damp with sweat.

He chokes on a moan when Petey forces his tongue inside.

It only lasts a few seconds before Petey pulls his face away. "*Damn*, those are some hot sounds you're making," he says. He sounds out of breath, and a little broken himself.

"You — *hahh* — you get all the credit," says Wade.

"No I don't, but I'll take it anyway."

"Take it all," says Wade, heatedly. "Take everything you want."

"Oh, I will." He gives Wade's ass a squeeze; Wade pushes back into it. His whole lower half feels smooth and loose, all the way up to his midback. "Since it's so kindly on offer," Pete adds.

He lifts his hand and gives Wade a not-so-light slap that makes both the windows and Wade's ears ring. "AH — *hhaannnn*..."

"You're melting," Petey remarks.

"What a *world*..."

Wade can *hear* Petey's grin as he laves his tongue over Wade's ass again. Despite the slap or because of it, there's almost no more tightness left, and Petey dips his tongue in and out with lazy, hungry ease. Wade whimpers into his elbow and clutches at the back of his own head and spreads his thighs farther apart and tries not to cry with the *goodness* of it all.

He almost doesn't notice when Petey stops, until he's standing next to Wade's head. He grabs the back of the bunched-up sweater and stretches it over Wade's head, leaving it looped around his upper arms to create a kind of hammock for his face. Then he bends forward and sweeps his tongue up the side of Wade's neck — Wade's voice breaks — and around to his nape, where he bites down hard enough to make Wade grunt.

It's a noble effort for Wade to open his eyes. He finds himself face-to-crotch with Petey, who's somehow still wearing pants, though they're hanging open and the swell of his cock is tenting the front of his underwear. Wade tries to reach out for it but the shirt has his arms trapped.

"Yeah, struggle," Petey says under his breath.

Wade stops struggling, just to see what he'll do about it. He sneaks a glance up at Petey's beautiful face. It's flushed and his eyes are wide and dark.

Noticing the attention, Petey turns sideways and cants his hip toward Wade, slipping slender thief's fingers into his front pocket and drawing out a tightly capped bottle of lube.

"Wait," says Wade, the surprise sobering him slightly. "You had that the whole time?"

"Yep," Petey chirps.

"Right in your pocket?"

“Right in my pocket.”

“At your *aunt’s* house?!”

Petey grins and shrugs one shoulder, wiggling his underpants down and slathering himself slick. Right there in front of him! So close Wade can smell it! **[SO unfair!]** Wade tries to reach for it again, and again fails.

“You filthy, filthy little slut,” says Wade, duly impressed. “I am *so proud* of you right now.”

Petey leans down and claims Wade’s mouth. The angle’s uncomfortable and Wade twists his neck as hard as he can to get more. The tip of a tongue laps the inside of his upper lip and then it’s gone, and Petey’s sauntering back toward Wade’s ass again.

This slap is much lighter than the last but Wade still yelps in his throat. The surprise gets him every time. Then a wet hand is thumbing him wide to make way for a pair of swift, smooth, determined fingers that push their way into his asshole and push an elongated, high-pitched sound out of Wade’s throat. He gasps a deep breath and blows it out carefully through quivering lips, then another, while Petey waits and strokes his other hand comfortingly up and down the meat of Wade’s ass.

“*Damn*, baby boy,” Wade breathes. “You’re not takin’ any prisoners.”

“No, just you,” says Petey, and Wade sighs happily.

The fingers inside him twist, and the sigh becomes a coarse sound.

Soon Petey isn’t just stretching him, is finger-fucking him open and crooking his knuckles at their deepest to press against that spot that’s so electric Wade can’t time his breathing right to moan, can only gasp and choke and grunt all out of rhythm, voiceless like an animal.

Petey’s other hand leaves his ass to sneak underneath and take hold of Wade’s cock — Wade almost falls over at the touch even though he’s already on his shoulders and knees — and he strokes it, not in time or even half-time but very, very slowly. Wade can feel every inch of Peter’s slick palm gliding torturously up and down every inch of himself, and he lets out a needy, protracted whine. Petey *chuckles* and keeps doing exactly what he’s doing.

Wade’s hips don’t know whether they want to thrust forward to force stronger contact for his cock, or dip backwards to fuck himself harder onto Petey’s fingers. He tries it one way, then the other, then both ways at once which doesn’t work at *all*. The burning in his ass stokes a fire in his lower belly and he feels it building, dizzily hears himself “*Ah — ah — ah —*” as it builds...

...and Petey’s hand abandons his cock, his driving fingers disappear. Wade can feel his ass opening up to nothing, trying to suck in something no longer there.

He buries his face in the stretched-out sweater and sobs.

Petey clicks his tongue. “Aww,” he croons, sweeping a hand in circles round Wade’s lower back. “Poor Wade. So close, and yet so far.”

Skilled as Wade’s mouth is, it takes some real stumbling to get words out. “Ah — buh da — uhmm, bah — wha — whatchu doin’ back there?”

“Oh, well, you see, that’s for me to know,” Petey says, sounding pleased as a cat with a gut full of canary, “and you to find out.”

"*Mean!*"

"Really? Here I thought I was being *very, very nice* to you."

"Big meanie jerkface," Wade mumbles.

"Why are you calling me names? You said I could do whatever I want to you."

"You can."

"So then why?"

"*Nnn...* never said I wouldn't bitch about it."

"That *would* be asking an awful lot of you," Petey says. "Maybe next time I'll ask for it anyway. With rewards or punishments on the line."

Wade whimpers.

Petey slaps his ass. *Hard*. Wade yowls.

"Whassat for?" Wade cries.

Petey hums an "I dunno" noise, and does it *again*, the big jerk meanieface!

"I felt like it," says Petey. "Why? What do you think *you're* gonna do about it?"

"N... nuthin'..."

"Wrong." Another smack — Wade catches the scream in his throat and swallows it whole. "You're gonna *take it*, is what you're gonna do. Because I want to give it to you and there's not a damn thing you have to say about it. You'll do it because you're *mine*."

Wade pants, cringing from another blow that doesn't come. His cock is sore from throbbing.

"Yuh... yours," he whispers.

Petey lays a gentle hand on Wade's back; Wade flinches.

"Color?" asks Petey.

"Green," Wade says, immediately. "*So green, jesus poledancing christ.*"

The hand rubs broad, slow circles. Wade hums and arches into it. "It's not that I like hurting you," Petey says quietly, "so much. I like making you *feel* things. I like that you *let* me. I like having you so *open* to me..."

He trails off, and his hand trails down Wade's side and off his skin.

Wade feels two hands and a firm weight press up against his ass. Something nudges at his hole, slips in just the tiniest bit before his ass tightens and spits it back out.

"Open for me, Wade," Petey says in a low, hoarse voice.

Wade breathes in through his nose and pushes back against the heat that's pushing him, pushing into him, slow and aching. His cock drips onto the couch cushion.

"That's right," Petey whispers. "Good boy, *my* good boy, yes..."

“Yes,” Wade echoes, and Petey’s belly comes up flush against him. Hands hold him where thighs meet hips, kneading into tight joints, loosening him, softening him, making his cock weep. He’d be held forever if he could.

Petey pulses inside him, making him arch. Hand smooths up his back and down again. Wade screws his eyes shut and tries to think about his breathing, but thinking about anything but Petey’s cock burning him up from the inside is tricky business.

“Easy,” Petey soothes. “God, you’re tight. Just try to relax for me, babe. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

“Yeah you do,” says Wade.

Petey shifts his weight a little, and that helps.

He doesn’t ask if Wade is ready this time, just draws slowly out — it feels like a loss — and sinks back in again, smoother this time. Pauses for another moment of adjustment. Wade knows this rhythm, and breathes his way through one more slow thrust and pause, then grips the wadded sweater fabric in his fists, curls his face into his shoulder, and braces as much as he can without tensing up.

On well-timed cue, Petey grabs the points of Wade’s hips and starts rocking in and out of him with comforting rhythm. It only takes a few thrusts before Wade’s ass finally gets the memo and stops trying to clench, just opens, just *allows*. Petey must feel the difference because he ramps up the intensity, pulling Wade’s hips back to meet his.

“Hahh... *harder*,” Wade says.

He gets another smack on the side of his ass in return and squeals as Petey fucks him through it. “You don’t tell me what to do,” says Petey.

“Ah — ah — *asking*.”

“Are you?”

“*Please. Petey...*”

Petey hums and buries himself in Wade, leaning over to cover his back with his body and stroke an arm up Wade’s chest. “Good,” he says, then rights himself and starts slamming into Wade like he’s digging his way to freedom.

Wade’s whole body rocks forward and back on the couch as Peter fucks him and the burning feeling returns. “Yah — *nnn*, yeah, yes, ye... than — thank you...”

“Don’t thank me ye — yet,” says Petey, and his voice is unraveling a little at the edges. Palms glide up Wade’s sides and drag back down in claws — Wade yelps and arches backward; Petey smacks his ass and he curls in on himself again. The fucking pauses for a minute while Petey bends over him again and kisses the middle of his back, loudly.

When he starts again it’s like the world is ending and the sound the earth makes as it cracks in half is the sound of slapping balls, obscene and transcendent. Wade couldn’t stop the high little grunts of pleasure if he tried, Petey’s forcing the sounds out of him to make more room for his cock. His head is buzzing and blissfully empty. When he tries he can’t open his eyes and gives in to the darkness instead. Sensation rockets through him so powerfully he can’t tell one limb from another.

“Yes... Daddy, yes...”

He can actually *feel* Pete throb inside him; that and Petey’s wrecked-sounding moan make Wade think at first that he’s coming from that, from hearing the word.

[Kink confirmed!]

{As if there were ever any doubt.}

Then: “Wade... I need to see you.” He pulls out and tears spring to Wade’s eyes, frantic at the loss.

But then hands are grappling at his thighs, at his shins, with bruising force they grab him and lift and twist him in midair until Wade lands with a deep thud on his back. The surprise forces his eyes open. Petey is staring down at him with something feral in his eyes, something close to panic almost; he rips his own shirt off over his head and throws it across the room. He lifts Wade’s legs, still bound together at the knees with his dropped khakis, and crawls beneath the pants so his warm, firm body is locked in between Wade’s hobbled thighs.

Petey surges forward, planting his hands on either side of Wade’s ribs, and rushes forward to kiss him, deeply and hot with meaning. Wade’s arms are still bound by the sweater above his head, hands to elbows, so he can’t grab Petey’s face the way he wants to, but he can lift his head to meet him and open his mouth in invitation for *more*.

Caressing Wade’s chin and throat, Petey pulls back a few inches and searches Wade’s face with desperate bleary eyes. “What did you say?” he asks.

“Da — daddy,” Wade gasps.

It’s barely left his mouth when Petey crushes their lips together, to swallow the word and all the surrender carried in it.

They’re still kissing when Petey lowers an arm to guide his cock back inside Wade and thrust, slowly, but not gently. Their chests rub together and Wade curves himself up into the touch. Hot sweat slides between them and the planes of their bodies guide them against each other. Wade, bound knees pressed up into the air by Pete’s body, bound arms pressed behind his head, pressed into the couch by Petey’s strength more than his weight, can’t move and couldn’t be happier for it.

Petey’s mouth roves around his throat, his collarbones, his shoulders and chest, a nipple. His hair smells like dollar-store shampoo and sweat; Wade arches his neck to press his nose into it and inhale. Electricity rushes a steady current up his middle to the crown of his head and down to his toes. His throat is dry from crying out. The upholstery under his back itches, damp with sweat and precum.

And Petey’s starting to moan, softly. He hoists himself off of Wade’s body — the air is a shock to Wade’s belly — and takes Wade’s aching cock in hand. No teasing this time; he works it with focus and determination, staring at Wade’s face, red down to his chest.

“Come for me, baby,” Petey says, and *god*, he sounds as wrecked as he looks, hair all stuck to his brow, wildness in his dark eyes, and unknown ferocity in his expression.

Wade wails. “Yes — ye — yes, *Daddy!*”

And baby boy yells a startled “Oh!” and pumps him hard with his hand and his cock, slamming into him, and Wade doesn’t need to try to obey, he’s arching back and yelling and struggling against his bonds and spilling hot all over Petey’s beautiful hand, and Petey’s spilling into him, and

they fall helplessly apart long before muscles collapse and Petey is draped across Wade's stomach, come between them, twitching and shuddering and gasping through dry throats.

It takes a long time for them to catch their breaths.

Petey's slowly stroking one side of Wade's chest with sleepy fingers when Wade swallows and says, "Can I thank you yet?"

Petey laughs. "No need. I'm trying to thank *you*."

Wade struggles tiredly against the stretched-out sweater; Petey reaches up and helps slide it off his arms, so Wade can wrap them around Petey's naked back and squeeze, and squeeze, and squeeze. Petey hums contentedly in his hold and rubs his cheek against Wade's chest.

"Can we just sleep here tonight?" Petey asks, thick-voiced.

"Whatever you want, baby boy."

"Wade?"

Wade hums a question.

"You're my favorite."

Wade laughs, softly. "No, *you*."

"Oh! Hey. Baby boy."

Peter's too tired to open his eyes, so he Vocalizes instead.

"Baby boy! *Petey*."

"No," says Peter.

"Come on, there's one more thing I have to show you!"

"Sleep now. Thing later."

"*No*, it has to be *now*. The story's ending and I don't want it to be over before I show you the thing! Pleease? It's the best part!"

Peter can't decide if Wade is more like a puppy who's decided that 4am is time to start chewing on its owner's hands or like a kid, also at 4am, but on Christmas.

Peter's lying on his side. Wade crawls on top of him, straddling the edge of his hip, and bounces, tugging at his elbow. "Come *onnn*, c'mon c'mon c'mon!"

Kid-on-Christmas it is.

"What else is there?" Peter asks, rolling over and dumping Wade off the sectional and onto the floor in the process.

"Ow. If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise."

Peter yawns and sits up. "Do I get a hint?"

“It’s...” Wade looks left and right, then leans in and drops his voice to a stage whisper. “...a coincidence,” he says, and grins a cracking-ice grin.

Peter smiles back before he can help it. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says, still smiling.

“Then you’ll just have to come with me and see for yourself.”

“Where?” He stands up. “What time is it?”

“Time isn’t real. It’s on the roof.”

“Hm.” He looks toward the bird curtains, and they’re just freaking *curtains* but his stomach feels weird and his chest tingly when he sees them. “Good a time as any to test that window exit, I guess. If you’re not going to let me sleep either way.”

“That’s the spirit. You could also take the stairs, too, though.”

”*You* could take the stairs.”

“Nooo, we hafta go up *together*.”

Peter sighs, but he knows Wade can tell it’s a put-on. After pulling his pants up, he turns around and pats his own shoulder. “Climb on.”

Wade doesn’t climb so much as he takes a running leap. If Peter hadn’t expected something of the kind he’d have fallen smack on his face. But he *did* expect it, and the slight tingle of Spidey-sense that thrilled up his spine just before Wade’s body impacted his felt more like cozy ASMR tingles than like adrenaline. Wade’s arms are tight around his shoulders; Peter reaches up and strokes a forearm. Wade’s sweater is softer than what he usually wears. Too bad the neckline’s hopelessly stretched out now, sorry not sorry. Peter drops his head and rubs his cheek against the sleeve.

Wade answers by rubbing his cheek against the back of Peter’s head. “I do love me a spideyback ride,” he says, dreamily, and his voice so close to the back of Peter’s neck sends soft tingles flowing in the opposite direction, smoothing down the sharper prickles of Spidey-sense.

Peter fiddles the window lock open, then the window. It slides sideways instead of up and down. That’ll end the problem of accidentally banging it closed at three in the morning and waking up everyone in this condo and the next. Its opening is generous and wide, and he maneuvers them both through without banging anyone’s elbow on anything.

Their place (*their* place!!) is second from the top floor so it isn’t a long climb to the roof. Good; less opportunity to be seen. The brick siding is dark and poorly lit, the sidewalk below blinded by downward-pointing streetlights. No one on the ground would be able to see much beyond the lights. Fire escapes provide obscuring shadows. It’s about as much privacy as one could get on the outside of a building in NYC. It’s nice and quiet, too. A gentle cross-breeze plays with his hair.

It’s perfect. And the brickwork feels nice under Peter’s fingertips.

The roof is solid with a ledge tall enough to lean your elbows on. There’s a grove of TV antennae over there, and behind them someone has been tending to a container garden with a little DIY greenhouse made of corrugated plastic. There’s a propane grill half-covered by a tarp standing next to the stairwell. People spend time out here. Could be tricky, with Spider-Man. Could be super nice, with real live friendly neighbors.

Wade slides off his back and pulls him by the hand to the other end of the building, toward that sturdy-looking pigeon loft.

Wade drags Peter to a stop in front of the cage. It's dusty but otherwise clean and empty. "Guess what came with the property when I bought the condo," says Wade with the proudest, most glowing grin.

Peter looks from him to the bird loft, then back again.

"If you guessed door number zero, you're right! Petey, the place came with its very own *pigeon house*! It's legally part of the property. I didn't even realize it until I was signing the papers! You can have *your own birds* and they won't shit all over the condo!"

"...Mine?" Peter hazards.

"Yours! This part, this part's *yours*. Not mine or ours. I don't want a bird house. This is all for you."

"...I can have pigeons?"

Wade throws his arms wide, nearly backhands Peter in the process. "You can have pigeons!" he cries. "Hell, you can have penguins if they fit."

"*I get to have pigeons?*"

"Yes!"

"My own *rooftop pigeons?*"

"Yes!! And if you decide you wanna make friends with the neighbors, this'll give you a good excuse to be up on the roof at all hours. Especially if you decide to take the stairs instead of the window sometimes."

Peter throws his arms around Wade's neck. "*Thank you!*"

"Heh." Wade hugs him back, hard. "I'm happy to take the credit, but it really was a coincidence. I swear I didn't know about this until I'd already decided on the place."

"Then you're the arbiter of good karma," says Peter, "and as such, you're entitled to a finder's fee."

"Oo, shiny. What did I win? Please say a brand new car."

Peter props the point of his toes on the roof and twists his foot back and forth. "Would it be corny if I said 'my heart'?"

"Yes. Extremely. Not that corny is a bad thing. I love corny... But I thought I already had your heart? As well as other anatomical features."

"You did. You just won it all over again, though. You keep doing that. I don't know if hearts are like cats and have nine lives to give, or if there are, like, different levels of heart ownership and you just keep level grinding, but you just *keep doing it* and if you don't stop it's gonna, like, lift me right off the ground like a Dragonball power-up or something."

Wade rubs the back of his head. "You want me to stop?"

“Hell no! I want to defy gravity with the power of love!”

“Sounds like something we should do in Sailor Moon cosplay.”

“Only if I get to be Mercury.”

Wade grabs him up and spins him around. Peter tenses but the sight and touch of Wade Texture keeps him grounded. Wade’s *beaming* up at him when he stops.

“I must’ve said something right,” says Peter, grinning what feels like a very stupid-looking grin.

“Only what matters,” Wade says, and lets Peter slide slowly back to the ground but keeps them tight and flush against each other.

It’s getting lighter out, fast. Spring isn’t too far away now and the sun is eager for it. The sky over Wade’s shoulder is pale yellow. Peter strokes Wade’s rough jawline, fascinated. Wade studies Peter’s hairline, rapt.

A flock of starlings zips past, rising, lifting the night on their dark backs. The clouds above the skyline are peach and rose gold.

Peter kisses Wade deeply, and is still kissing him when the sun breaks over the geometric horizon, glittering over a thousand pieces of glass, even the broken ones shining bright as mirrors across the dusty shadows of the faraway city.

Chapter End Notes

Smut-specific tags: bad BDSM etiquette, D/s dynamics, spanking, rimming, edging, fingering, anal sex, light bondage, daddy kink

Finally finished! And it only took 5+ years, during which my life changed several times over (sometimes thanks to this fic, actually). I want to say thank you to all y'all who read this far, and a special thank you to those who've been reading since the beginning.

Find me on Dreamwidth and Pillowfort under this same name.

I'll leave you with a fun fact: you just read over 200k words of spideypool and *not one* of those words was "chimichanga". And I'll bet you didn't even notice. :P

Works inspired by this one

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